Wisconsin Academy review. Volume 47, Number 3 Summer 2001

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wisconsin academy review

THE MAGAZINE OF WISCONSIN THOUGHT AND CULTURE

What Makes a Family? Jackie Mitchard's New Novel on Blood and Kinship

■

Summer Fiction by Wisconsin Writers (Take This to the Beach)

■

Meet Short Story Contest Winner C. J. Hribal

■

Wisconsin's Sacred Places: A Pilgrim's Tale

■

New Encyclopedia Explores Religion and Nature

Novelist Jacquelyn Mitchard at home with her husband, Chris, and their daughter, Maria.

Photo by John Urban

Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters

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Mother love and more with novelist Jacquelyn Mitchard, page 12.

features

This funny green man is holy, some say. Find out why on page 30.

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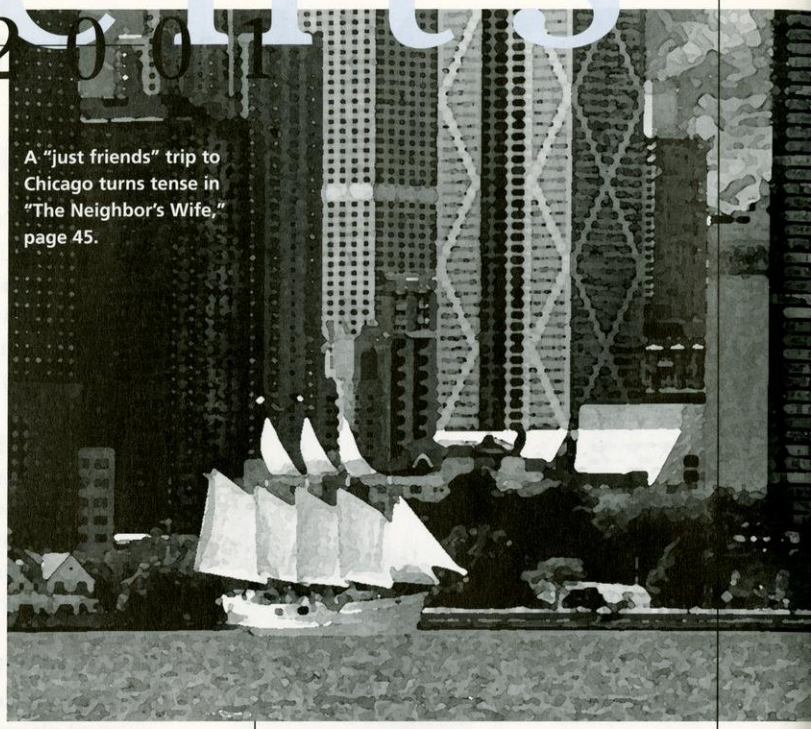


A "just friends" trip to Chicago turns tense in "The Neighbor's Wife," page 45.

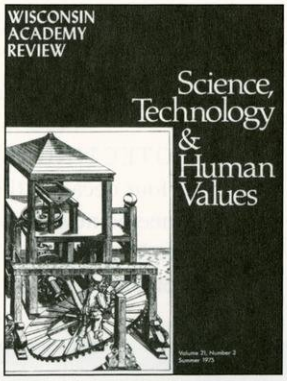
departments

Past and Present

"To further emphasize that biological knowledge and human values together play an important part in achievement of this desperately needed wisdom, I have coined the term bioethics."

—UW–Madison emeritus professor of oncology Van Potter, writing in the *Wisconsin Academy Review* (Summer 1975). Potter, an Academy Fellow, defined wisdom as "the knowledge of how to use knowledge for the general good."

That's still the Academy's definition of wisdom. Read more about us on page 11.



The Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters provides a place where people who enjoy reflecting upon culture, nature, and the problems of our times can gather for fruitful discourse and meaningful action. Together, we help create a thinking community.

The Wisconsin Academy was chartered by the state legislature in 1870 as an independent, nonprofit membership organization. Its mission is to gather, share, and act upon knowledge in the sciences and humanities for the benefit of the people of Wisconsin.

*The **Wisconsin Academy Review** wishes to thank Bruce Jacobs for his generous support.*

Remembering Marcia

We have just lost a very fine person who meant a lot to me and a lot to this magazine.

Our art director, Marcia Larson, died in a car accident just before Memorial Day weekend. She was 29 years old. Her boyfriend, Tom Lenz, died with her in the crash just outside Verona.

Marcia—who also answered to "Marshie," "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia," and even "Marcia Mellow" with characteristic good cheer—was a blazingly gifted graphic designer. The magazine you're holding was largely her creation. Charged with doing a complete revamp of the *Wisconsin Academy Review* last summer, Marcia worked with a tight budget (and a charitably low fee for herself) to create what another art director, thumbing through it, called "a thing of beauty." She also worked wonders for *Madison Magazine*, her big gig, where she served as art director for the past year and a half.

Design didn't seem to be that hard for Marcia. She had a wonderful knack for turning concepts into visuals, for hitting exactly the right look and feel you'd describe to her. Moreover, she greeted with "can-do" composure any kind of technical problem or ridiculous deadline you could fling at her.

As a Sun Prairie girl with long blond hair, rosy cheeks, and a fondness for bowling alleys, Marcia didn't exactly fit your stereotype of what a hot-shot art director might be like (short, chic hairdo, mainly black outfits, and an East Coast attitude). Her complete lack of artifice was part of her charm. So was her wry wit.

Often when we lose someone, we wish we had spent more time consciously appreciating what that person meant to us. With Marcia, I can honestly say that after nearly every encounter I was reminded of what a pleasure and a privilege it was to work with her. She inspired that same feeling, I know, in her many other friends and colleagues.

Anyone who knew Marcia also knew how much she loved her family, an extended, tight-knit clan in and around Sun Prairie. We extend our heartfelt sympathy to the families touched by this tragedy.

We will miss Marcia greatly.

A Marcia Larson Memorial Scholarship Fund has been created for graphic arts training at Madison Area Technical College, where Marcia learned her skills. Your donation may be sent to MATC Foundation, 3550 Anderson Street, Madison WI 53704. Checks should be made out to MATC Foundation, with Marcia's name written in the memo area.

INDEPENDENTS DAY

In this issue we congratulate some obvious winners: the three authors who won the *Wisconsin Academy Review* Short Story Contest. Read all about 'em on page 4, and savor first-prize winner C. J. Hribal's story on page 33.

But here's another group of "winners": the 12 independent bookstores from all over Wisconsin—from Ashland, Hudson, and Spooner to Appleton, Sister Bay, and De Pere, in addition to Madison and Milwaukee—whose sponsorship made the contest possible. These stores are all members of Book Sense, a national league of independent booksellers that was formed to give the "little guys" some marketing clout and visibility.

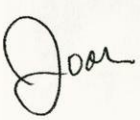
Besides funding the contest, our sponsors helped make a small bit of history: this is the first statewide writing contest in the nation to have been sponsored by Book Sense members. As such, we caught the attention of Avin Mark Domnitz, CEO of the American Booksellers Association, who said, "This Wisconsin event demonstrates the unique attributes that differentiate independent bookstores from other book retailers. Independent booksellers are dedicated to their communities, have great knowledge of authors and books, and have enormous passion for bookselling, which all provide great value to consumers."

Amen to that. Our list of sponsors appears on pages 5 and 37. Please join us in supporting them with your patronage.

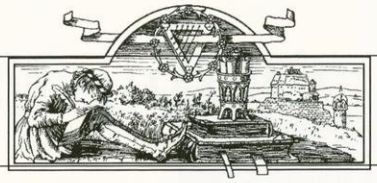
Still more congratulations are in order. *Wisconsin Academy Review* fiction editor Gordon Weaver won the Larry and Eleanor Sternig Short Fiction Award at the Council for Wisconsin Writers. And our poetry editor, John Lehman, won the Christopher Latham Sholes Award for outstanding encouragement of Wisconsin writers. Hats off to them!

As for our books editor, Dean Bakopoulos, his story "Please Don't Come Back from the Moon" appears in Frances Ford Coppola's magazine, *Zoetrope: All–Story*. Reliable sources tell us that Bakopoulos is now being hounded by book publishers and agents from New York City. You can read his thought-provoking tale of male desertion at www.zoetrope-stories.com.

Meanwhile, we hope you enjoy this issue.



Joan Fischer
608/263-1692 ext. 16
joanfischer@facstaff.wisc.edu

SHORT STORY  CONTEST 2001

meet the winners

A disillusioned, overweight couple living in a bog argue about an old infidelity with disturbing consequences. A young woman working in a supermarket is unable to break out of her minimum-wage life. A woman reflects on her bittersweet experience of motherhood when she delivers her daughter's baby during a snowstorm.

These are the characters inhabiting stories by the three winners of the *Wisconsin Academy Review* Short Story Contest—the best of 154 entries from writers around the state. The top three were named by acclaimed Wisconsin-bred novelist A. Manette Ansay, who ranked them from six finalists chosen by a judges' panel of editors and authors.

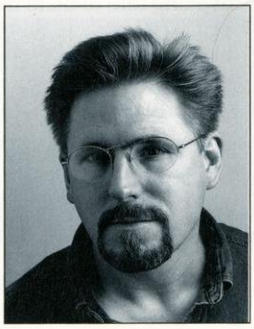
It was tough to pick a few winners from such a talented pool, says *Wisconsin Academy Review* books editor and contest judge Dean Bakopoulos.

"The submissions prove that the art and magic of storytelling is alive and well in the Badger State," says Bakopoulos. "From sweet, sentimental remembrances of rural life to brooding, dark tales of urban alienation, the stories we received highlighted a fresh, strong chorus of Wisconsin voices. Many of the stories that didn't win deserve to be heard, and I'm confident that someday they will be heard. It was a pleasure to judge a contest that harvested such a bountiful crop of original and passionate work."

The blind judging also yielded some surprises. Top winner C. J. Hribal (silent "H," rhymes with "bible") is already an established writer, but the other two are fresh faces on the literary scene. Second-place winner Sara Swanson is a recent college graduate, and third-prize winner Miranda Casey Fuller is an emergency medical technician and a mother of six.

All three stories will be published in the *Wisconsin Academy Review,* beginning with Hribal's in this edition. Swanson's story will appear in the fall issue, published in September, and Fuller's in the winter edition, which appears in December.

Here are brief bios of the three winners:



C. J. Hribal won first prize ($1,000) for his story "Morton and Lilly, Dredge and Fill." He is the author of *The Clouds in Memphis* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), which won the Associated Writing Programs Award in Short Fiction. He is also the author of *Matty's Heart* (New Rivers Press, 1984), a collection of short fiction, and *American Beauty* (Simon and Schuster, 1987), a novel. He is currently completing a new novel, *The Company Car*. Hribal also edited and wrote the introduction for *The Boundaries Of Twilight: Czecho-Slovak Writing from the New World* (New Rivers Press, 1991). The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and a Bush Foundation Fellowship, he is an associate professor of English at Marquette University, where he teaches creative writing and English. He is also a member of the fiction faculty at the Warren Wilson College M.F.A. Program for Writers. He lives with his wife and three children in the Cold Spring Park neighborhood in Milwaukee.

For more on Hribal, see the interview on the next page , a review of his latest book on page 50—and, of course, his winning story on page 33.

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Sara Swanson, 22, lives in Burlington and graduated magna cum laude last December from the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay. Her story "When You Don't Go to College" placed second ($500). She earned a bachelor's degree with a double major in English and humanistic studies, and will begin an M.F.A. program in creative writing at the University of Notre Dame this fall. There she plans to concentrate on fiction, although her poetry has been published in *Writer's Cramp* and *Byline*. Whichever form she chooses to write in, she tries to "expand small or subtle situations or moods in order to develop and illuminate the various underexplored areas of life and the world," she says.

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Miranda Casey Fuller, of Hartland, placed third ($250) with "Whiteout Conditions," the story of a mother's emergency delivery of her own daughter's baby. Fuller knows all about motherhood and emergencies: she is a mother of six who has been a foster parent, a volunteer firefighter, and a psychiatric nurse. She is currently employed as an emergency medical technician.

Many of those jobs have overlapped, which often forced her to place writing on the back burner. But even at her busiest, she has always read a lot and tried to learn whatever she could about the craft, she says. Several years ago she entered a local writing contest and took first place. Last year she won a merit scholarship to the Lost State Writer's Conference. She won a state writing contest for adult fiction and had a story published in *Lichen*, a

Canadian literary magazine. Fuller has also had a number of articles published in *Fiction Fix*, an online magazine dedicated to fiction writing, and now serves as its articles editor. In addition to filling that post, Fuller is putting together a short story collection and wrestling with the third draft of a literary novel set in Northern Ireland during World War II.

Meet the Authors

Come hear our short story contest winners read their stories on Thursday, July 19, at 7:30 p.m. at Canterbury Booksellers in Madison (315 W. Gorham Street, 608/258-9911). In addition, first-prize winner C. J. Hribal will appear on the Wisconsin Public Television show *WeekEnd* on Friday, June 29 (check your local listings; date subject to change).

Special thanks to Wisconsin members of Book Sense, a national league of independent booksellers, whose generous sponsorship made the contest possible:

A Room of One's Own Bookstore & Coffeehouse, Madison
Books & Company, Oconomowoc
Canterbury Booksellers Cafe, Madison
Conkey's Book Store, Appleton
Downtown Books, Hudson
Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops, Milwaukee
Mallach's Book Store, Watertown
Northward Bookstore, Ashland
Northwind Book & Fiber, Spooner
Passtimes Books, Sister Bay
The Prairie Bookshop, Mt. Horeb
The Reader's Loft, De Pere

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Many thanks, too, to our short story contest judges: novelist A. Manette Ansay; poet John Lehman, *Wisconsin Academy Review* poetry editor and publisher of the Cambridge-based national literary journal *Rosebud*; author Gordon Weaver, fiction editor for the *Wisconsin Academy Review* and president of the Council for Wisconsin Writers; author Laurel Yourke, a creative writing instructor with the UW–Madison Extension; and author Dean Bakopoulos, books editor for the *Wisconsin Academy Review*.

"I want readers to inhabit the lives of my characters."

An interview with first-prize winner C. J. Hribal.

What is "Morton and Lilly, Dredge and Fill" about, in a nutshell? Not the plot, but the deeper meaning.

This is a good question, and it deserves a long answer. I think it gets at the issue of why we write and read stories, and there's no simple answer to that.

"Deeper meaning" is one of those phrases that gives me the willies. I don't think you can reduce a story to a simple statement of intent, or a single meaning. Stories function best when they're about more than one thing, when they're about a great many things. In my stories, I try to get at the significance of people's lives, and how they live them, and that seems to me a very complicated business. Someone once asked Milan Kundera what was the essence of his great philosophical novel *The Unbearable Lightness Of Being*, and Kundera responded something along the lines of, "It's a love story." I love that answer. A book about history, about politics, about philosophy, about language and how we use it, about the meaning of life, and Kundera says he's written a love story. And he's right.

If you've been on this planet for very long, and been married or in a relationship for any length of time, you start wondering what it is that keeps people together, particularly people locked in what seem to be bad or even mediocre marriages. But then, even good marriages can go through tough times. I was thinking, too, of what people are willing to do for love. I've written about Morton and Lilly before—they show up in a novella called *War Babies*—and the nature of their relationship has always fascinated me. Morton feels trapped, but won't leave, and Lilly feels neglected, betrayed, and taken for granted, but her longing to be loved by the man she's always loved—a man she wanted to have children with, though that never happened—drives her beyond self-respect. There's both loathing and longing in that relationship, and a lot of dark history between them, and it's their shared and separate pasts that both drives them forward and holds them in place. That their house is built on a marsh was one of those intuitive decisions that just seemed right as I was composing the story, and, if you'll pardon the pun, grounds the action. The idiocy and the effects of sprawl—people building houses where they don't belong—pop up as a subtext in my writing from time to time, and that Morton and Lilly would have made that kind of mistake seems in keeping with their character. So I suppose that's part of what the story's about, but I'd like to think it goes beyond that, too.

Ultimately, I want readers to inhabit the lives of my characters, to "live" lives they wouldn't have experienced any other way, and I don't think that experience—or any life, for that matter—is reducible to a simple declaration of deeper meaning. If I could put things in a nutshell, I wouldn't need to write the story.

continued on page 6

continued from page 5

What makes you a Wisconsin (or at least Midwestern) writer, beyond the fact that you live here? Are there qualities that mark the writing of this region?

The short answer to this is that I think Midwestern writers are aware of the particular qualities of their landscape. It's not as dramatic as other landscapes in this country, perhaps, but being surrounded by land—an ocean's worth of land, when you think about it—puts things in a certain perspective for Midwestern writers. Then, too, we're aware of our place in a different sense as well—we're flyover country, after all, the checkerboard pattern of the nation's midsection that people look down on as they fly from coast to coast, to where "the real stuff" is happening. We're told constantly that we're not exciting, that we're backward, a step behind what's happening, bucolic, not worth bothering with because we're all so darn wholesome. And we know those are condescending myths, and that the real "real stuff"—love, work, children, how we conduct our lives—is happening all around us down here, too. We're "simple" folk living pretty complex lives. (And while we're generally good-natured about the Laverne and Shirley/cheesehead jokes, it rankles us a little, too—nobody likes being labeled and stuffed in a box.)

So we look closely at what's around us, to see what connects us and what divides us, what drives us and what makes us who we are. In that sense, I don't think we're any different than writers anywhere else. Our particularities of place have helped shape how we look at the world, but our concern with exploring the human condition is the same. Doesn't all writing that hopes to be universal begin as "regional" writing? Think of Faulkner—his work is grounded in Mississippi and its troubled history, but his truths are human truths. Is Alice Munro a "regional" writer because much of her fiction is set in Ontario? Of course not. As writers, we make use of what's around us, bringing our characters to life through close observation of the details of our lives, and that may make for the writing having a particular flavor, but in the big scheme of things, we're no more regional (or provincial) than a writer situated in Manhattan and writing about New York.

How did it feel to nab the top prize?

It felt great. Recognition is an elusive joy for most writers, so when it comes, it's a wonderful feeling. So much of what a writer does is done in solitude—the composition and seemingly endless revision—that when you've finished something and people say, "That's good," you positively glow with happiness. I know I'm lucky, too. Most people don't get their work recognized—nobody is publishing the names and accomplishments of, say, mothers or bank examiners or millwrights—so I feel blessed that I'm doing what I love, and have the opportunity to get what I do recognized in this fashion. My thanks to everyone involved who made it possible.

Health, Human Services, and Poetry

The former governor announcing the poet laureate position last year. Cathryn Cofell, of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, looks on.

Photo courtesy of John Lehman

Tommy Thompson may be far from his beloved Wisconsin, but he's staying in touch with the state through poetry.

You may recall that the former governor created the position of poet laureate for Wisconsin even though he admitted at the time that he didn't understand much about poetry himself.

Exile has made him soulful. Poet Laureate Ellen Kort says that Thompson phoned her from D.C. to ask her how she was doing in her new position. After chatting for a while, Thompson posed the Appleton poet a question.

"Would you do me a favor? Would you send me a poem now and then?" he asked, according to Kort.

"Are you serious?" Kort asked him.

"Yes, very serious," Thompson replied. He said that reading her poetry would help keep him connected to the state.

Kort was touched. "I think it says a lot about Tommy Thompson personally that he called me from Washington," she notes. "It says a lot, too, about the power of poetry."

Kort had the opportunity to meet with Thompson during the selection process and said he showed genuine interest in her poems, asking her how she came to write various pieces. Her poem *Derailment*, about the Weyauwega train tragedy, especially caught his eye.

"I think he's come to an understanding of what poetry's all about," says Kort.

Poetry is powerful, indeed.

Live from Thrasher's Opera House: the Green Lake Festival of Music.

London, Beijing, Oshkosh

Who says that chamber music should come in one flavor only? For more than 20 years, the Green Lake Festival of Music has served up a tasteful blend of both classical and less traditional chamber music. This season's international theme promises even greater variety, presenting music from the Baroque to the present by artists from Oshkosh to China.

Sir David Willcocks, "the godfather of English choral music," is back again with his son Jonathan Willcocks, director of the junior department of London's Royal College of Music. During their two-week residence they share conducting duties of the adult Festival Choir, while Jonathan also works with the Children's Honors Chorus.

"It is the mix of young and old, amateur and professional—united in a deep love of choral music—that gives the Green Lake Festival its special character and brings together men and women from the U.S. and abroad," says Sir David. "They return to their homes refreshed by their musical experience and inspired to spread a love of choral music in their own communities."

The festival encompasses 11 concerts from June 30 through September 2. Most are held in Thrasher's Opera House in downtown Green Lake and are preceded by a conversation with the artists. Highlights include:

Amelia Piano Trio & Friends

The trio, one of the fastest-rising young ensembles in the U.S., will perform an all-Schubert program featuring the Trout Quintet with Romanian-born bassist Catalin Rotaru. Saturday, July 7, 7:30 p.m.

Betty Xiang & Wei Yang

The renowned husband-and-wife duo perform Chinese and Western music on traditional Chinese instruments. Much of the Chinese music is based on traditional legends and stories described by the artists. Saturday, July 28, 7:30 p.m.

Esther Budiardjo

First-prize winner, Kappell International Piano Competition. Works by Beethoven and Brahms and excerpts from Leopold Godowsky's Java Suite highlight this concert by a pianist whose artistry the *Boston Globe* has said "summoned laughter and tears, made the mind work, the spirit soar." Saturday, August 11, 7:30 p.m.

For more information contact the Green Lake Festival of Music, P.O. Box 569, Green Lake, WI 54971, website: www.greenlakefestival.org

by Mary Hiles

who's who

Edith Nash

Photo courtesy of Edith Nash

Occupation: Retired educator; now spend most of my time writing poems, short essays, and letters to the editor.

Years in Wisconsin: 30 years' residence, but many summer vacations here before that.

Claims to fame: Co-founder and director of Georgetown Day School in Washington D.C., a parent-owned school of the liberal establishment; involved in statewide and local Democratic election campaigns; lifelong involvement with Native American issues, including fighting for preservation of Skunk Hill (Powers Bluff), an Indian gravesite near Wisconsin Rapids.

Currently working on: A memoir comprised of poetry and prose, soon to be published by Crossroads Press in Ellison Bay.

Mission: I'm working for the benefit of humanity and social change all the time, in a small way.

Quote to live by: "If you're not living on the edge, you're taking up too much room." Claudia Schmidt, singer and songwriter.

What this state really needs is: More interest in elections and more people voting.

Simple pleasure: When I can't sleep, I cook in the middle of the night to entertain myself.

When You're Eighty-Five

for Edith Nash

Winnebago fancy dancers make knee and elbow room for you
at your pow wow
and I watch from the Lincoln High School bleachers,
remembering the Ethiopian at Roosevelt's cold inaugural
who warmed you with good booze,
and the day you visited a young Ernie Hemingway at Oak Park,
and the night
when collecting cash for Georgetown school
you met Joe McCarthy,
and the afternoon at the cottage
when Philleo asked Fran Hamerstrom
how a certain owl sounded
and she stretched out on the ground to show him,
and all the pink-frosted doughnuts you endured
while Philleo joyously campaigned,
and the night as a kid in Chicago,
when they had your "coming out" party
at a favorite speakeasy,
the Toledo Wheelbarrow Company,
and the time when a Rapids woman you knew
sold some old medical books to Eddie Gein,
and I wonder
what will happen
when you're eighty-five.

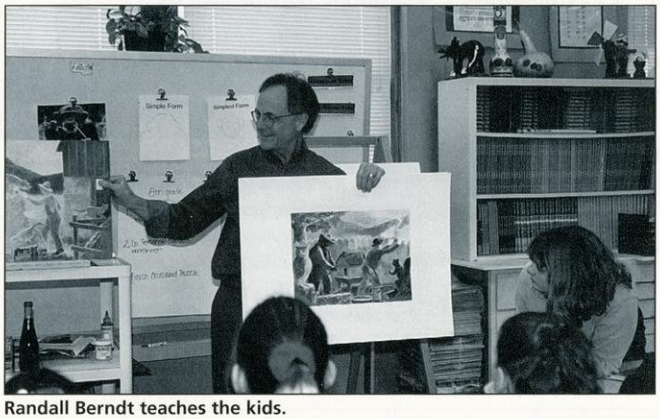
by Mark Scarborough

*From the book **Blackberries Grown Wild** by Mark Scarborough. Available from the author at 131 Letendre Avenue, Port Edwards, WI 54469. Price: $10.*

"A Joyful Education"

Two Columbus schools wove science, art, and language into one innovative, fun-filled program with the help of painter and Wisconsin Academy Gallery curator Randall Berndt.

Berndt spent two weeks as an artist-in-residence at Columbus Middle School, working with a science teacher, an art teacher, and sixth-graders. The goal was to bring environmental studies and language arts into student art classes. "This ecological approach to art education explored the interdependency of individuals and all living organisms and ecosystems with environments that surround them," write teachers Melanie Trainor, Sue Sewell, and Bonnie Halverson.



Randall Berndt teaches the kids.
Photo courtesy of Melanie Trainor

Student artwork was directly connected to studies in science, which included the biodiversity of plants, arthropods, and birds found in Columbus; the study of a local stream; and the health of the Great Lakes ecosystem.

With Berndt, students learned how to "read" a painting, discussed the relationship of humans to nature in various works, and created art and verbal messages to accompany discussion of environmental problems facing Columbus, the Great Lakes, and wetlands.

In a related program, Berndt worked with second-graders at Columbus Elementary School. Each child wrote a story about something that had happened to him or her, and illustrated it with one painting. As Berndt demonstrated with his own work, a painting does not tell a complete story; much is left to the viewer's imagination. The children, too, were able to create works that left the viewer guessing.

"I was impressed with the high quality of the art program in both schools, and with the dedication and thoughtfulness of the teachers," says Berndt. "The visiting artist program integrated story, image and the art process with science and the personal lives of the students. It was a joyful education for me as an artist to show my paintings to these young students and hear their interpretations. A further reward was seeing the art they made as a result of our interaction."

For more information about the program, call Melanie Trainor at 920/623-5954 ext. 3234.

Music of Yore

Marion Verbruggen

Do you yearn for the sound of recorders, lutes, harps, and krumhorns?

You can enjoy these seldom-heard instruments to your heart's content, and even learn to play them, at the Madison Early Music Festival & Workshop July 8–21.

The Festival, to be held in two one-week sessions, consists of 10 evening concerts and classes with world-renowned guest artists. The Festival was created to provide an opportunity for musicians, scholars, teachers, and early-music enthusiasts to gather and share information and ideas about medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque music.

"We have discovered that there are many people in Wisconsin who love this music and want to be more involved either as performers or as concertgoers," says Paul Rowe, a UW-Madison music professor and one of the Festival's artistic directors. "We hope to become a focal point of this activity in Wisconsin and the Midwest, and to educate, promote, and encourage wider acceptance and appreciation of early music."

What is the appeal of early music?

"In attempting to re-create the sound of older times, we can get a real sense of what life may have been like before the existence of recording devices," says Rowe. "Another appealing feature is that it is often on a small scale and is sometimes somewhat simpler than the larger, post-1750 music that is standard fare for today's performances."

Renaissance music has been undergoing a "renaissance" of its own in recent years.

"The history of 'early' music goes back to the late 1940s in America and was popularized by Noah Greenburg and the New York Pro Musica Antiqua. His editions and performances sparked a revival in America that is continuing today," notes Rowe. "The Pro Musica led directly to the creation of still-active groups like the Waverly Consort, the Ensemble for Early Music and the Boston Camarata. There are now many organizations that specialize in historically authentic performances on reproductions of instruments from various historical periods all over the world."

Speaking of instruments, a historical instrument and music fair will be held July 13–15.

Festival guest artists in residence are the Newberry Consort with Ellen Hargis and world-renowned Dutch recorder player Marion Verbruggen.

For more information about the Madison Early Music Festival, call 608/263-6670, or go to www.dcs.wisc.edu/lsa/memf

Science Is Not Enough

In his essay in the Spring edition, Academy Fellow Paul G. Hayes wrote, "... the products of science are the main agents of social change. The UW's stem cell research holds immense promise for human health even as it confronts some religious groups with unacceptable ethical consequences."

The Academy published the proceedings of the October 1–3, 1992, UW Institute for Environmental Studies conference, "Human Values and the Environment." Conference coordinator and Academy member Charlotte Zieve wrote in the introduction, "The idea for [the conference] grew out of growing concern about the accelerating deterioration of global environmental quality. A conference to foster interest in the danger of building a values-free approach to how we manage the environment seemed an excellent way of bringing knowledgeable people together to address this issue."

Both Mr. Hayes and I attended this conference, he as a panelist, I as an interested Academy member. He indicated that, as a journalist, he judged the growth of human population to be the biggest news story of the 20th century.

Several years ago I heard the late UW history professor George Mosse say in a "University of the Air" lecture that in the Middle Ages people went to priests for answers and that in the 20th century they went to medical doctors for them.

I would suggest that there is danger in attempting to build a values-free approach to the many human population questions of stem cell research. We are an Academy of the sciences, arts, and letters. None of the three has primacy over the others. Respectful dialogue is difficult and challenging. It is also necessary.

Carolyn Heidemann
Lake Mills

Fog

A poem by Agatha Petrulis, age 8, of Grafton

I was riding in my car one day,

and suddenly a blanket of mist

fell all over me, like never ending

forests, and a sun that would never show,

like big tidal waves of water, coming

toward me—was . . . fog, my world is

covered in FOG!

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Christine McDermott

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writing her life

Jackie Mitchard's turbulent life oftens reads like one of her novels. Her latest book, *A Theory of Relativity,* continues Mitchard's unique, intense blend of art and reality.

INTERVIEW BY JOAN FISCHER
PHOTOS BY JOHN URBAN

Author/columnist/journalist Jacquelyn Mitchard is one of those rare people whose lives have evolved into legend. Her path has had so many dramatic ups and downs—most of them quite public—that following her fortunes has become nearly as engrossing as reading her novels.

Things happen to Mitchard in spades. When her newspaper editor husband, Dan Allegretti, died of cancer in 1993, she was left not merely a young widow—she was a widowed mother of four with no means of support but her writing.

WHEN SHE WENT OFF to a writers' retreat the following year to jump-start her first novel, she brought along scraps of notes in a Tupperware container—the seeds of a story that had come to her, full-blown, in a dream. When she emerged weeks later with 70 pages of a manuscript, New York book publisher Viking bought it for a $500,000 advance on a two-book deal. *The Deep End of the Ocean*, the story of a toddler abduction and a family's implosion, went on to become a feature film and the first selection of Oprah's Book Club, which sent sales skyrocketing around the world.

Mitchard's "downs" were also public record. The relatively modest sales of her second novel, *The Most Wanted*, was the topic of a highly visible *New York Times* article titled "Reality Returns for an Anointed Author" about Mitchard's changing fortunes and the lack of bounce experienced by Oprah authors from one book to the next.

Things were rocking in Mitchard's private life as well. She adopted a baby while still a widowed single mother, bringing her brood to five. And while she was writing *The Most Wanted*, the second husband of her dreams appeared on her doorstep in the guise of a "Zen carpenter artist" 13 years her junior who'd come to work on her house. Life imitates art again—or is it the other way around? There's a character much like him in *The Most Wanted*. Mitchard and Christopher Brent Sornberger, whom she married in 1998, adopted a baby who's now two years old: Maria Christopher, better known as Mimi or Mia. That's six kids (in case you're counting).

Which brings Mitchard's uncanny combination of life and art nearly to the present. Mitchard's third novel, *A Theory of Relativity*, was inspired by a real-life custody dispute in Milwaukee involving adoption, a case she was moved to write about several times in her syndicated weekly newspaper column, "The Rest of Us." Little did she know that this drama, too, would become her own. While Mitchard was writing the book, Mimi's biological father decided to fight for custody of the baby he'd put up for adoption. "It was certainly the last thing that we expected, that we would end up ferociously living these emotions," says Mitchard.

Recently Mitchard carved out time for an interview on her peaceful rural spread outside Madison—as peaceful as a home can be with five children in residence, two ferrets, a dog, and three full-time employees. Her grown daughter, Jocelyn, was about to make Mitchard a grandmother, and she was busy writing her weekly columns ahead of schedule to free herself for a nationwide book tour this summer. Mitchard was also working on her next book, *Twelve Times Blessed*, which she calls her "coming of middle age novel." "It's Bridget Jones turns 40," Mitchard divulges with a knowing smile.

Peace, in keeping with Einstein's famous theory, is relative.

At the heart of this book is a custody dispute involving adoption. What made you want to examine adoption? Why did you feel this topic was ripe for exploration?

Well, I was writing another book, it was a ghost story. And I've come to believe that it's unfair that people say that I write stories about family because I only write stories that are overtly about family. All books are about family. Every book in that shelf is about family, including the ones that are about the Civil War. Everything, including presidential scandals and civil wars and celebrity squabbles—all of that is about the kind of families we come from.

That said, there was this case in real life a few years ago in Milwaukee, and it's not this story, but it dealt with the issue of a young uncle who was struggling to adopt his sister's only child when his sister died from cancer and then later on her husband died in an accident. And he was denied permission to do that because he was adopted as a child and therefore did not meet the test of the statute. It's called the stepparent adoption statute and it makes it easier for close family members to adopt orphans.

And like everyone else who read that story I was outraged, and I wasn't outraged only because some of my kids were adopted. I was outraged because the judge's ruling seemed to neuter the sense and intent of adoption, which is to confer all the rights and responsibilities of the natural parent upon the adopted parent.

So I wrote about it in my newspaper column and then I wrote about it again for *Ladies Home Journal*, and in that setting I wrote about how inappropriate I found it to be that children ... like Michelle Pfeiffer's two children always were designated as one was adopted and one wasn't. And I think that adoption, like any other personal topic, is germane only in its context.

Like when people say to me, "Which one of your kids was adopted?", I say, "Do you have sex with your husband?" And they say, "Yes, yes, I do." And I say, "Well, how many times a week?"

[*laughs*] I mean, because that's something to be proud of, you know, it's great. That's personal! And it's not something that I want to have broadcast, it's a personal matter in our family.

"They don't understand the covenant that adoption is. In old Western movies when Indians got married, you would cut your hands and then put your hands together—it's called hand-fasting. What it means is that henceforward, you and I are of one blood. We are kin."

Children aren't stock, they aren't like thoroughbreds—they're people, and they're brothers and sisters. To make those kinds of designations is outside the house.

And so when I wrote for *Ladies Home Journal* and about this particular case, I wrote about how inappropriate it is that we're still so [*sharp intake of breath*] "Oh my goodness!" about adoption. This is an adoption country. Every single one of us is adopted in this country because there is no "American." This is a country that was formed by the ideal that you could adopt, that you could come from any lineage, and become a person who was an American. So obviously it gets under my skin personally and also politically, in a sense.

And then I just couldn't get rid of this story. I would sit around trying to write my ghost story—which is actually a very nice story and someone should write it, I wonder whether I will—but I'd sit around thinking about these people and of course since I'm not them, I'm not the judge, I couldn't answer the question that the novel writer always asks, which is why? Why would someone do that? Why did the people make the decisions that they made, why did they act the way that they acted?

So I ended up setting aside my other book and writing a book about trying to figure out why. Because each of the people in the book is acting out of an entirely correct and also defensible theory of what family means and what the description and responsibilities of families are. And though they're all valid, only one of them can be triumphant in this particular situation.

In your experience do people really regard adoption as a relationship that is worth less than relationship by birth?

People who haven't been through it or who don't know you well, yes. People give you this "compliment" all the time that is like a backhanded slap right across the chops. They say, "I don't think of your children as adopted." That's supposed to mean that they think of me as being closer to my children and of them being more my children than other adopted children—or something.

What that means is that they don't understand the covenant that adoption is. In old Western movies when Indians got married, you would cut your hands and then put your hands together—it's called hand-fasting. What it means is that henceforward, you and I are of one blood. We are kin.

But many people think of adoption as foster care, as this sort of temporary, awfully generous arrangement on our part, to take in these unwanted little urchins. They think of people who are adopted parents as being awfully nice. They say things like, "I just think that's wonderful." But it's no more wonderful nor unselfish than anyone else's wish to have a child, in fact it's entirely selfish to have someone that you want to love you. The only thing that it does not comprise, often—though it's comic how many times it does—is looking like you. Because no one ever picks out the kids who were adopted, in our family, anyway.

The Ties that Bind

Two families fight over an orphaned baby in Jackie Mitchard's latest novel.

BY JOAN FISCHER

A child is torn away. A family is torn apart. The last time Jacquelyn Mitchard dealt with these plot elements, she landed on *Oprah*, became a first-novel millionaire, and saw her book *The Deep End of the Ocean* made into a movie starring Michelle Pfeiffer.

Her new book, *A Theory of Relativity,* concerns adoption, not abduction. Two families-in-law are shattered when the young couple that binds them dies in a car accident. Their grief moves to anger, outrage, and flat-out hatred when they begin fighting over custody of the couple's orphaned baby daughter, Keefer. Both families love her, but which one "deserves" to raise her? That wrenching question is as old as Solomon. Mitchard deftly moves through the ravages of this family feud to explore the nature of love, loss, commitment, and kinship.

On one side are the McKennas of Tall Trees, Wisconsin, a fictitious town up north. Lorraine, the fierce mama lion of the clan, and her husband, Mark, dreamed big when they named their adopted and now grown children after Georgia O'Keeffe and Gordon Cooper. Shortly after having her baby, Georgia becomes terminally ill with cancer, but the car crash gets her first. The McKennas want to raise Keefer, with Gordon as the adoptive parent. Gordon is a high school science teacher and a respectable enough citizen—but he's only 24, single, and has a taste for women and partying.

Enter the Nyes, of Florida, the family of Georgia's husband, Ray. They are younger, more conservative, and more showily Christian than the McKennas. They put forth Madison relatives—Ray's cousin, Delia Cady, and her husband—as rival adoptive parents with impeccable credentials. They are seasoned parents, have another child at home, and Delia is a stay-at-home mom.

A key decision, however, is not based on love or competence, but the letter of the law—a law that discriminates against people who were adopted. Only "blood relatives" may be granted the kind of expedited adoption the McKennas had hoped for. Suddenly Gordon's status as a person who had been adopted becomes pivotal, and electrifies the custody dispute with a political cause. The "blood relative case" quickly spirals into a national media circus, with everyone from adoption rights groups and *Newsweek* to Tom Brokaw weighing in.

If this sounds like real life, it's partly because it was inspired by a real-life case, says Jackie Mitchard (see interview, page 12). Some three years ago a Wisconsin state law giving special preference to blood relatives was used to block an adoption in Milwaukee. That case prompted the legislature to change the law to give equal rights to people who were adopted, a move followed by numerous other states.

Certainly *A Theory of Relativity* will cause many readers to ponder, perhaps with more empathy than they had had before, the problems faced by families formed through adoption. And one can easily picture the kind of reception the book might get on the TV talk show circuit—imagine Oprah tying in the book with studio appearances by families embroiled in adoption custody disputes.

Thankfully, *A Theory of Relativity* has a lot more going for it than a political agenda. The adoption controversy is used to illuminate the many different ways that people define and experience family. In explaining the theory of relativity, Ray long ago told Gordon that "Nothing ... was truly objectively measurable, because all things were made of particles and all particles were in a constant state of change ... no sooner was one determining factor measured than it changed, and everything, including the nature of the entity doing the measuring, man or computer, was changed, too."

"Relativity" in the title, of course, also refers to being a relative, a family relation. By refusing to present any easy answers, the novel honors the complex and highly subjective nature of such grand human ideals as love, kinship, ethics, and justice.

The novel's characters effectively transmit that complexity. Lorraine and Gordon are especially compelling figures who manage to be magnetic, infuriating, heroic, and touchingly flawed. The custody dispute becomes so consuming that it transforms all the lead characters to varying degrees, and not always for the better. Occasionally members of the same family horrify each other with their behavior.

The book is also marked by a keen sense of place and how place shapes character. Mitchard knows Wisconsin. You can practically swat the mosquitoes and smell the fish frying. She has peopled a vividly evoked landscape with characters who quite credibly are *of* that place, making this book a special treat for Wisconsin readers.

Have any of your kids who were adopted been on the receiving end of some of these kinds of comments?

Yeah. Whenever something good happened to one of my kids when they were little—like when my middle son got to meet Michelle Pfeiffer—one of the kids in class had to say, "Well, but your mother's not your real mother." And I've taught them to say, "She is my real mother, she's not my birth mother." And also that adoption is how you get to your family, it's not like a chronic condition.

But there's a controversy about that. There's an activist group of people called Concerned United Birth Parents, all of whom are birth parents who have surrendered their children for adoption, and all of whom regret it. And they're like the pro-lifers, they march with posters about how evil adoption is and how it robs children of their heritage, and no one should ever do it, and people who call themselves parents who are parents through adoption are liars.

One woman wrote me a letter and said that I should do everything I could, including provide financial support, for the birth families of my children who were adopted, and return them to their biological families if I really did love them.

But when it comes to parenthood, love is not the point. It's like marriage. I love the line in *Moonstruck* where Nicholas Cage says, "Marriage has nothing whatsoever to do with love." I mean, love is great. Everyone loves a baby. Family is about commitment and responsibility along with love, as is marriage. It's about who's going to go the distance. Yes, it's easy to be sentimentally in love with the idea of a little girl who looks like you and who may look like your Aunt Sophie. But if you're not willing to go the distance, if you're not willing to put up with the "unlove" that is part of parenthood, and the frustration and tears and helping and not being able to help—it's a much more complicated thing than love.

You were involved in an adoption dispute yourself, one that took place in Texas. Are you willing to talk about it?

I kind of have to talk about it, I guess. I—"want to" is a funny way of putting it, but I don't think this book would have ... you know, I certainly would have rather had it be a more shallow book, and not have gone through what we went through.

People say that *Deep End of the Ocean* had the authenticity of grief because I was grieving, I was widowed and I was grieving when I was writing that book. I really would have rather had [*A Theory of Relativity*] be a less "authentic" book and not have known what it really feels like to have the very real threat of your baby being taken away from you while I was doing it.

We got married, but we didn't know whether we'd ever have children because I had had a lot of trouble with fertility, but I got pregnant right away and I had a miscarriage. And then I got pregnant again and I had a miscarriage. And by then I was thinking well, I'm pretty long in the tooth. When we got married I was 44. So maybe we'd better start to think about adoption.

But we hadn't [seriously] begun to think about it when we got this call, and it was nine months to the day after we had been married. And Mia had been born, and there were some special circumstances, some special issues around her birth that made it difficult for them to think of a family who would be the best family for Mimi. And of course they thought of us. And it wasn't until three months after her birth that her birth father made the challenge, the reason being basically a clerical error. Someone who wasn't her birth dad genetically, I guess, was willing to sign off on it.

So three months after her birth, her birth father challenged the adoption.

Right. He was in prison at the time. He's not a bad person, he was just this dumb kid with lousy friends, and he was in prison on the kind of charge you only go to prison for in Texas. So on top of the fear of losing Mimi, whom we adored, were the feelings that the people in the book had to go through. In a sense, he's our kin, but we had to muster all the hatred we could to mount some kind of legal fight against him, and it was nearly impossible because we had no rancor toward this guy. His careless act of love had led to our considered act of love. He didn't know that I wrote books for a living, he just knew us as Mr. and Mrs. Brent. He had no motive except the motives of the people in *A Theory of Relativity*. He had his own idea of what kinship meant.

So it was horrible ... I had to keep writing this book because it was due, otherwise I would have gone back to the

"It's easy to be sentimentally in love with the idea of a little girl who looks like you and who may look like your Aunt Sophie. But if you're not willing to go the distance, if you're not willing to put up with the 'unlove' that is part of parenthood, and the frustration and tears and helping and not being able to help—it's a much more complicated thing than love."

ghost story. But I had to keep writing this book and by the time it was finished it needed a really good editor because there was so much terror and pity and introspection in it that it almost overwhelmed the plot. We had to take a lot of that out. And ultimately, the day before we were to go to court, he decided to settle. He decided that he would allow us to adopt her because she was 12 months old and he didn't want to make her suffer.

My agent suggests now that I write a novel about this woman and her agent who win the lottery and then inherit this island where the only people who live there are men who look like Russell Crowe. [*laughs*] Because in *The Most Wanted* I wrote about the only kind of guy that I thought I could fall in love with, who was a younger guy who was this Zen carpenter artist who had a hammock for a bed—and he showed up on my porch and we got married five weeks later.

I mean, it was eerie. It was certainly the last thing that we expected, that we would end up ferociously living these emotions. You count on the "it could never happen to me" barrier when you write a novel, because then you can do anything, you can put these poor people through any amount of mayhem because it can never happen to you. And then to have this happen to me ... it made me much more compassionate and much more unwilling to declare in the book who the bad guys and the good guys were.

All this seems to suggest that this is a book about adoption, and it isn't a book about adoption. It's a book about two families at war who never imagined, I mean they may not have been the most cordial *mekheteneste* [Yiddish for "in-laws"] in the whole wide world, but they were cordial in-laws, and suddenly they're in a situation where they must be not only on guard but really at arms toward each other. It's about two families who had an event, a marriage and a birth, that traditionally bonds families, and instead this family has been driven to a protracted and unseemly, on both sides, conflict over it.

"There was a great deal of affection for my state, and its basic practicality and the courage of the people that I know in this state. I wanted Wisconsin to be a character in this book."

Why, in your work, do you feel so consistently drawn to the topic of motherhood?

Well, duh [*laughs*]. I'm the mother of six and soon to be the grandmother of one. That's what you get from these families that span generations. My children have an aunt who's eight, and my grandchild will have an aunt who's two.

To be absolutely serious, motherhood is the first and most influential relationship. The presence of fathers is intensely important, the absence of fathers is even more influential, but mothers are the slingshot that sends you into the world and into your own relationships, and it's the relationship that never gets worked out until both of the parties in it have closed their eyes for the last time—even if it's a good one. And certainly it's the leading item on my resume as a person. I'm stunned anew by how handily and easily you can muck it up, and also by the amount of grace that you can bring to it without intending to. It's like you take your kids to the Grand Canyon and they remember the snow cones. That's how motherhood is.

More than any of your other books, this one is steeped in Wisconsin as a place. Do you share that opinion, and how did you achieve that?

There's very much a thread of big town, small town in this book. I wanted to have people whose lives were sort of inscribed by this mythical place, Tall Trees—which is not Hicksville, but is definitely a small town—to be caught in the headlights of a big-city controversy, as it sometimes seems to happen when people in Wisconsin get thrust into news that has a national reach.

So there was a great deal of affection for my state, and its basic practicality and the courage of the people that I know in this state. I wanted Wisconsin to be a character in this book.

What kind of a character do you think Wisconsin proved to be?

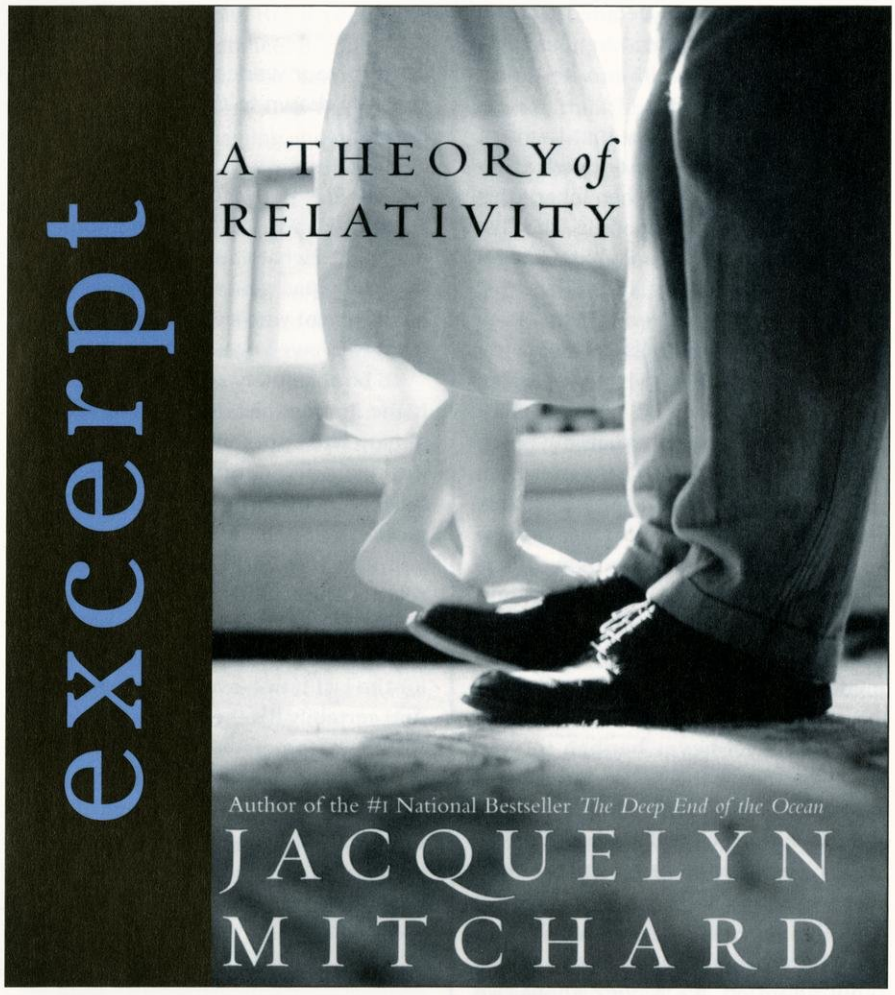
I don't bristle when people call me a regional writer. I think that there is a certain kind of writer, and I'm not comparing myself to her, like Edna Ferber, or Willa Cather, or even Wallace Stegner—there's a sense of big breadth in some books that are Midwestern. They're not intricate little jeweled novels of manners in which you make ironic comments about popular culture. They're about real things. So I like to think of myself as a writer who's from Wisconsin, and to put myself if not in the company with, then certainly down on the steps of the federal building with, writers like Willa Cather, because they wrote about the trouble that actual people can get into and get out of, and what happens to a marriage under stress, and what happens to a town when the main industry departs.

Wisconsin would play the kind of character who would interfere in your life a little bit more than you'd wanted, maybe, but also invite you over for breakfast. I would never want to live anywhere else.

Joan Fischer is editor of the ***Wisconsin Academy Review.***

Thicker Than Blood

A passage from Jacquelyn Mitchard's *A Theory of Relativity*, due in bookstores in July.



Lorraine and Mark McKenna lost their only daughter, Georgia, and her husband in a car accident. Their son, Gordon, has stepped forward to adopt Georgia's orphaned baby daughter, Keefer. In the following scene, Lorraine and her sister-in-law Nora look out the window at Gordon and Keefer as they set off for the cemetery to visit Georgia's grave.

Both Georgia and Gordon were adopted at birth—a circumstance that never seemed very significant up to now.

"LOOK AT THEM," Nora mused.

Snow had begun to fall, huge, wet flakes tatting against the front window. The only speck of color against a milky sky was Keefer's bobbing snowsuit. "Isn't she just the picture of Georgia? That tough little way she walks." Prickles like a bolt of electrical current shot up her forearms when Lorraine pushed the drift of envelopes they were stuffing onto the floor.

"That's just it!" she said. "That's just it, Nora. No one ever thinks of family any way but that very way!"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"She looks like her. He looks like him. You're the picture of your father. Mark's the very image of his grandmother!" Lorraine ranted. "Don't you hear yourselves?" Nora was struck speechless. "Every time Mike's boy Matt walks in the door, one of you says, 'There's little Mike, right there!' And then someone says, 'But Pete's got Debbie's eyes.' And then someone else will say, 'No, really he looks more like Debbie's sister.' It's like this is an endlessly fascinating subject. Even if you saw them the week before, someone has to comment on how much more they look like someone in the precious family . . ."

Did she do that? Nora tried to collect herself.

"No one ever meant anything wrong by it," she finally said.

"But how do you think my kids felt? You know how they felt? They felt excluded; I would see Georgia look away . . . Georgia always wanted everyone to love her. She was always trying to please people, whether it was me or her lousy friends or teachers. And Gordon, he doesn't look a thing like either of us. It was just so ignorant. Do you know what Doctor Slater's wife said to my son? When her boy was on the soccer team with Gordon? Not that I could ever imagine old man Slater being able to father a mouse, and how she could even sleep with a guy sixty years old."

"We're sixty years old, Lorraine," Nora said, struggling to keep up.

"Well, we weren't then! And she was always such a snooty bitch. She walked up to me and Gordie after a game and said, 'Evan wants you to tell him why Georgia doesn't look like Gordon, even though they're brother and sister. And I've just told him that adoption was a very nice thing that some people do for children who don't have homes.' I didn't know what to say, Nora. And you know what she said to us, then? She said, 'Well, Georgia could be yours, but Gordon sticks out like a sore thumb.'"

"I don't believe that," Nora said. "Though Doc Slater was always a horse's ass."

"Oh, Nora, it's like that for everyone else, the whole world is just a mirror, and people just want their kids because they're a reflection of themselves. . ." And then she added, "It was why we never came out with you."

"What?"

"We kept to ourselves, Mark and me, because we just couldn't stand it. It was as if nobody cared what the kids were doing at school or how they were growing, like the only value a child had was his McKenna chin or his big Nordstrom feet. It was like we'd brought something new into the family, a treasure to us . . . and nobody cared! I think it was half the reason Mark was against adopting. He knew you guys would never accept it."

"Our parents maybe, Lorraine. Old people set in old ways. When a woman couldn't have children back then, she just accepted it. I don't think our parents ever knew an adopted child."

"But you're not old and set in your ways, Nora. We grew up in the fifties. People understood it as a fact of life when we grew up. We didn't mind being different, but we minded having our kids' faces rubbed in it all the time."

"That was why?"

"Yes."

"We thought you didn't like us."

"Didn't like you? That's outrageous, Nora."

"It is not, Lorraine," Nora said, thinking, in for a penny, in for a pound. She was trading more cross words in twenty-four hours than she had in the previous twenty-four years. So be it. "You always had a way about you, of saying keep your distance—"

"Don't you see why, Nora? Even now? The whole world feels exactly the way you do. Judge Sayward feels that way. The legislators do, too. They think we feel like our children are. . . just guests in the house for eighteen years."

"How could you think I felt that way, too?" Nora stood up. Lorraine opened her mouth to speak. "If I felt that way, Lorraine McKenna, why would I be here?" Nora thought of Georgia's orange sweatshirt, its arms animated, lifting, outstretched. "Georgia was dearer to me than my own life, Lorraine. Maybe you think Hayes and I are dumb hicks, and if I ever said things that hurt her, I'll take that with me to my own grave. But if you think we ever set out to hurt you, or my brother, or your children, then I'll get up and walk out that door and take my ugly ways with me. And if you don't mean it, you'd better accept that there has been hurt on both sides and enough of it for a lifetime to go around."

Lorraine turned away, and looked out the window. "You can't even see the cemetery, the snow is so thick," she said.

"But it's warm out. They're fine," Nora replied. "It is coming down, though. Look funny going up, wouldn't it? Remember how Rob used to say that?" Nora thought if she didn't try to joke, she might cry, or run for the door.

"Nora," Lorraine said suddenly, "I never thought you were a dumb hick. You're the smartest hick I know."

Nora snorted.

"And more than that, you're . . . you're my friend. You're my family. If I didn't think that, I'd never have been so rude to you as I was just now. And Georgia loved you . . ."

"That's okay, Lorraine, that's enough."

"No. She loved you as much as she loved me. You made her feel part of the family, Nora. You have to forgive me. I'm not . . . I don't know how I can—"

When the telephone rang again, Nora answered. She was the most composed, though her ears still rang with the words of Lorraine's wrath and sang with the words of her respect, words she'd been fearing and hoping to hear for thirty long years.

Religion Meets Nature

A new global encyclopedia seeks to map an emerging field.

BY BRON TAYLOR

"As Scientists, many of us have had profound personal experiences of awe and reverence before the universe. We understand that what is regarded as sacred is more likely to be treated with care and respect. Our planetary home should be so regarded. Efforts to safeguard and cherish the environment should be infused with a vision of the sacred."

—From *Wisdom of the Elders: Honoring Sacred Native Visions of Nature* by David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson (Bantam, 1992)

This statement was issued in the early 1990s by a group of prominent scientists alarmed about environmental degradation. The signatories included Stephen Jay Gould, Hans Bethe, Stephen Schneider, Carl Sagan, and Peter Raven.

They seemed to echo Morris Berman, who, in *The Reenchantment of the World* (Cornell University Press, 1981) argued that such a vision was essential if humans were to develop environmentally sustainable lifeways.

As concern has intensified about the deterioration of the earth's living systems, such sentiments and opinions have proliferated. Long-established religious bodies have issued statements of concern and launched practical and pedagogical initiatives in response. Ecumenical efforts are under way as well. Perhaps foremost among them is the *Earth Charter*, a document developed through a multiyear, global dialogue among nongovernmental religious and social actors, which expresses a religious reverence for life on earth (*Center for Respect of Life and Environment, Earth Ethics 8 (2 & 3)*, 1997). The document's shepherds now are urging United Nations ratification, hoping it will provide a beacon of conscience toward a global ethic of environmental protection and social justice. Although ratification seems unlikely, given the failure of member nations to respond aggressively to any significant environmental problem, the United Nations itself seems receptive, publishing in 1999 a massive volume entitled *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity* (Intermediate Technology Publications, London, 1999, edited by Darrel Posey).

The contributors to this volume argued that biological and cultural and religious diversity are mutually dependent, and asserted that all cultures have their own spiritual resources upon which to build sustainable lifeways. The volume's editor, summarizing an additional prevalent theme, asserted that indigenous and traditional cultures share an understanding that "all creation is sacred and the sacred and secular are inseparable," and they "frequently view themselves as guardians and stewards of nature."

While practitioners of indigenous and traditional religions endeavor to revitalize their cultures and express their own understandings of the earth's sacredness and concomitant human obligations, increasing numbers of people educated in Western industrialized societies agree with such perceptions and ethics, and are sometimes influenced by them. Many of these people are, in turn, fueling the growth of new religious movements that consider nature sacred and ecosystems their axial moral concern. When combined with certain political ideologies and sufficient urgency, such religions have inspired militant and sometimes violent environmental action as one form of earth-veneration. (For more on that topic, see my article in the *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, Winter 1998.)

Even mainstream environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, are becoming bolder, acknowledging the spiritual perceptions animating many of their members. A recent unofficial club poster declared, for example, that being a Sierra Club member "is not about getting back to nature [but rather] is about understanding we've never left." It is about "accepting your connection to nature" and understanding that "You are part of it . . . you work for the planet because you belong to it." Viewing this poster, in which human legs, colored like birch bark and mixed among a small grove, accentuated the ideas that were expressed in prose, I was reminded of the roots of the term religion which, although not entirely clear, are often considered to be associated with the idea of being bound to or connected with a transcendent, transforming other.

These examples are but the tip of an iceberg. Diverse assertions about the complex relationships among environments, religions, and cultures have emerged, and have been argued—sometimes with great intensity—during the past three decades.

Much of the contemporary religion and nature discussion was sparked by scholarly works published decades ago, such as Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, 1973) and Lynn White Jr.'s brief but influential article purporting to uncover "The Historic Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." When White's article was published in 1967 in the widely read journal *Science*, it convinced many that Christianity fostered fearful, instrumental, or indifferent attitudes toward nature, thereby precipitating environmentally destructive behaviors. Others

argued that religions originating in Asia, or indigenous religions wherever they are to be found, promote more environmentally responsible lifeways than do monotheistic religions. Still others disputed such claims, arguing they were based on misperceptions, romanticism, or religious bigotry. The debates continue today.

Indeed, these debates helped precipitate the emergence of a new scholarly field, which is often labeled "religion and ecology." Initially, it was spurred by soul-searching among religious figures about the anemic response of their own traditions to the increasingly obvious global environmental crisis. The early years of this debate were preoccupied with discussions about the resources that religions might bring to the struggle for environmentally sustainable and socially just societies. Less attention was paid to the obstacles to the needed transformations inherent in the religions under discussion, although these issues did receive some fleeting discussion.

These debates were taking place primarily among the intelligentsia of these traditions. To social scientists like myself, however, they seemed to assume tight connections between environment-related attitudes and behaviors rather than to illuminate or demonstrate such connections. Slowly, research has begun to examine empirically such connections. Meanwhile, scholars pioneering environmental history, and anthropologists long interested in the relationships between human economies, cultures, and ecosystems (practicing what is increasingly labeled "ecological anthropology"), have also been broadening significantly the nature and religion inquiry.

Meanwhile, religionists, and religious studies scholars themselves, often remained preoccupied with religious ideas, values, and texts. But with an influx of historians and social scientists taking seriously the "religion variable" in culture-ecosystems interactions, greater rigor and skepticism was introduced to the inquiry. Questions were asked about premises previously assumed, such as: Are nature-related religious ideas really influential upon nature-impacting behaviors, and if so, which ones, under what circumstances, and to what extent?

The value of creating a global *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* became apparent to me and my co-editor Jeffrey Kaplan as we reflected on the widespread fascination with such questions and discussions, and the growing curiosity about previously ignored or little-explored questions. Three decades after the publication of Lynn White's provocative article, it seemed as though the time had come to summarize the understandings and debates that had emerged, to spotlight lacunae in the discussions to date, and to telegraph to the increasing number of scholars being drawn to the field where the most important and fruitful inquiries might be found. When we began discussing the creation of the Encyclopedia in 1997, we viewed it as one of those rare moments when, working with others who are asking similar questions, we might help shape the future of a still nascent academic field. In doing so we have been guided by this fundamental human question: What are the relationships among Homo sapiens, their diverse religions, and the earth's living systems?

It was not as if such questions had not been asked before. Some anthropologists had previously led the way. Rather, the opportunity was to build bridges so that they, along with other social scientists, religious studies scholars, and indeed, academic specialists from a variety of disciplines, along with practitioners of the religions in question, could engage each other in a dialogue that would enhance the understanding of all parties.

I turn now to some of the specific questions that we are taking up in the Encyclopedia, which we believe deserve greater scholarly scrutiny. I mention them here, partly for their intrinsic interest, and partly because I hope to use this forum to arouse curiosity, and to invite additional participants to contribute to the Encyclopedia project.

1) What are the perceptions and beliefs of the world's religions toward living systems in general and toward individual organisms in particular? In what ways have these traditions promoted ecologically beneficent or destructive lifeways? Are some religions intrinsically "greener" than others? Many have asserted, for example, that religions originating in Asia generally promote attitudes of respect and reverence for nature. More recently, however, scholars have begun to address why, then, such societies have degraded significantly their natural environments. Conversely, scholars are now beginning to grapple with why some societies shaped by monotheistic religions appear to have stronger environmental protection movements than societies characterized by putatively more nature-sympathetic religions.
2) How are religions being transformed in the face of growing environmental concern? To what extent do expressed beliefs about duties toward nature cohere with behaviors toward it?
3) Do various religions have internal and external resources for, or barriers to, the kind of transformations that are widely considered necessary if humans are to achieve ecologically sustainable societies? How can "greener religions" be encouraged? Scholarship addressing these questions is often motivated by a praiseworthy environmental concern, but such a motivation can obscure important questions, such as the following:
4) Do natural environments shape human consciousness, behavior, and history in general, and religions and their environment-related behavior in particular? This question inverts the more common scholarly focus, which examines the influence of religion on ecosystems. It focuses instead on the environmental side of the nature-human dialectic.[1]
5) How are various and different religions, from old and established to new and emergent, influencing one another, as people struggle to address—and to make sense of—their environmental predicaments? How are contemporary environmental understandings influencing religion? (How true are the claims of scholars who insist that ecological understandings are far more influential on religions than the other way around?)
6) To what extent (if at all) can contemporary green movements be considered religious? If they are religious, should we consider all of the resource-related conflicts they are engaged in to

Notes

1. It might be argued that this question takes nature seriously. Jared Diamond, for example, in *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (New York City: Norton, 1997), provided a sweeping human history in this regard. Roy Rappaport's work, including, for example, articles collected in *Ecology, Meaning, and Religion* (Richmond: North Atlantic, 1979), advanced a related, and plausible, argument, regarding the influence of varying ecosystems on human consciousness and religion that, although unfashionable today given the near hegemony of scholars stressing the social construction of reality, nevertheless deserves to be taken seriously.
2. I am thinking here of the Epic of Evolution Society (see Loyal Rue, *Everybody's Story: Wising Up to the Epic of Evolution* (State University of New York Press, 2000) and the Society for Scientific Pantheism, see their website: http://members.aol.com/Heraklit1/index.htm. For a two-part study of diverse forms of nature-related religion, including those inventing rites to evoke and express a sense of the universe as a sacred miracle without adopting elements often considered essential in religions, such as beliefs in divine beings or forces, see Bron Taylor, "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality: From Earth First! and Bioregionalism to Scientific Paganism and the New Age," *Religion*, 31(3):pages tba, July 2001, and "Earth and Nature-Based Spirituality: From Deep Ecology to Radical Environmentalism," *Religion*, 31(2):175–193, April 2001.
3. For a provocative argument regarding the possibility of a global, "terrapolitan" earth religion, see Daniel Deudney, "Global Village Sovereignty: Intergenerational Sovereign Publics, Federal-Republican Earth Constitutions, and Planetary Identities" in Karen Litfin, ed., The Greening of Sovereignty in World Politics (Boston: MIT Press, 1998, 299–323).

be religious struggles? What are the limits of cross-fertilization, among and within religions and regions?

7) What are the reciprocal influences between nature and religion in inter-human conflict and violence? Does natural resource scarcity play a significant role in this regard, intensifying conflicts and the likelihood of religion-and-nature-related violence? Yet more specifically, what are the reciprocal influences between apocalyptic or millenarian religions, and environmental sciences, which are producing increasingly scary prognostications?
8) What are the relationships among religious ideation, breeding, and population growth and decline? How is this related to other questions listed above?
9) How are the sciences integrated into contemporary nature-related religion and ethics? Is it possible for religions to consecrate scientific narratives, such as evolution, in such a way as to invent religions with no supernatural dimension? If so, can we still call such worldviews and perceptions religious (such as the statement by the scientists with which I introduced these reflections)? [2]
10) With regard to "nature religions" that consider nature to be sacred: What are the "spiritual epistemologies," the perceptions in nature, the sources and cultural constructions, which have shaped such religions? And how and to what extent are political ideologies integrated into the nature-religion stew?
11) Are there any patterns or tendencies emerging globally in contemporary earth-related spirituality and religion?
12) If, indeed, there are patterns and tendencies, how are the people involved in nature-related religion and spiritualities reshaping not only the religious terrain, but also the political and ecological landscape around the world?

I pose this last question in part because of evidence that earth-related religiosity is increasingly going mainstream—escaping its often countercultural breeding grounds—and not only breaking out in Sierra Club posters. In the early 1990s, for example, Jack Ward Thomas, then the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service—an agency demonized by many practitioners of green religion for "desecrating" forests—introduced a book on ecosystem management in a way that would shock his adversaries:

"Nature-based spiritual beliefs are generic to all [forest] users, whether holders or nonholders of sectarian religious beliefs . . . diverse types of nature-based spirit-renewing benefits . . . are common across all types of users, whether a timber cutter, a hunter, a member of an environmental organization, a hiker, or a Native American." (From *Nature and the Human Spirit: Toward an Expanded Land Management Ethic*, edited by B. L. Driver and Daniel Dustin, Venture, Pennsylvania State College, 1996.)

This remarkable claim suggests many fascinating questions, including: What are the prospects for the emergence of an earth-based civil religion that might, just possibly, provide a common-denominator "sacred earth" ethic? One that might decisively reshape the resource regimes in the United States and perhaps beyond? [3]

While it would be premature to venture an answer, the question poses one of many provocative issues that scholars from numerous disciplines can explore in the Encyclopedia and other venues in years to come.

Bron Taylor is Oshkosh Foundation Professor of Religion and Director of Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh. ***The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*** *will be published in 2003 in London and New York by Continuum International Publishers. Taylor is also a committee member of "Waters of Wisconsin," the Wisconsin Academy's statewide initiative on water use and policy. For more information see: www.wisconsinacademy.org/programs/wisconsinidea.html*

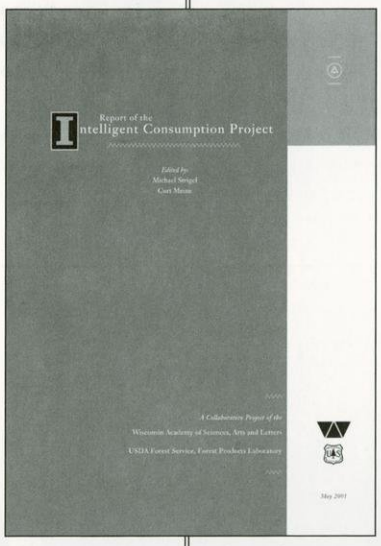
Those interested in this inquiry are warmly invited to visit www.religionandnature.com. This website is devoted to both the Encyclopedia and to scholarship exploring the complex relationships among environments, cultures, and religions. We hope that what can be learned through such critical inquiry will play at least some small role in helping Homo sapiens live up to their name by discerning the path toward a sustainable future.

The Intelligent Consumer

Americans favor conservation—but we also want our big houses and our SUVs. A report by the Wisconsin Academy and the federal government takes a first step toward reconciling the consumption–conservation dilemma.

BY MICHAEL STRIGEL

"To live is to kill." When Dr. Michael Soule, a world-renowned professor of environmental studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz, spoke these words at last year's Society for Conservation Biology meeting in Missoula, Montana, he hushed and surprised attendees. How could the founder of this "green" organization be condemning some species to death? But judging from the ensuing questions and comments, the statement had struck a responsive chord. The tone among the gathered conservationists suggested that they believed it was time to move away from the seemingly black-and-white environmental arguments of the past and into a new era: accepting human consumption of natural resources as a necessity while carefully considering and taking responsibility for the level and type of that consumption.



While it seems natural to accept resource consumption as a fact of life, it is often difficult to connect it with its consequences for the environment. Like many children today, I spent my childhood in suburbia. Also like many children today, my parents were both professionals who worked in the city and produced ideas and services rather than tangible products. The clothing, food, and other daily needs of our lives came from the mall, the supermarket, or the hardware store. How was I or any other child to learn that every purchase had consequences I could not see, but were significant nonetheless?

But unlike many children today, I was very fortunate to have grandparents who ran a small farm near Racine. My visits to that farm taught me much about where clothing, food, and other daily needs really came from and helped me to make that "connection." Today very few of us have any direct role in the management of land or the production of the commodities we depend upon. Although few of us directly manage natural resources (or even know someone who does), we all remain resource consumers. We are increasingly unable to see how our consumption affects our natural resources—and this has created a paradox that we have yet to resolve.

The paradox is embodied in the fact that, through our consumption, we are often destroying and significantly altering an environment that we depend upon and value highly. One of the outcomes of the environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s was a renewed public appreciation for a broad range of issues associated with land, air, and water pollution; pesticide use; and population growth, as well as increasingly specialized approaches to resource management. Attention to these issues led to the enactment of such legislation as the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. These laws and others focused attention on the responsibility that individuals and institutions have for maintaining and restoring the natural resource base upon which all life and any acceptable standard of living depend. A recent nationwide survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* showed that concern for the environment is not waning, and that a 58 percent to 34 percent majority feel that protecting plants and animals should take precedent over economic development.

This love for the "environment" has led to new roles for private and public land managers who are responsible for producing the commodities we demand as a society. In the U.S. Forest Service, which manages an area the size of Texas, the public preference for environmental protection has created a paradigm shift away from resource production and toward resource preservation. The shift was articulated in a 1992 announcement by then-chief Dale Robertson that the agency was adopting "ecosystem management" as its operating philosophy, emphasizing the value of all forest resources and the need to take an ecological approach to land management.

The focus on environmental values has, for the most part, benefited the resources and ecosystems in the United States. Less attention, however, has been given to the question of how to reconcile consumer demand with the stated preference for resource protection. The U.S. public consumes more resources today than at any other time in our history, and consumes more per capita than almost any other nation. Since the first Earth Day in 1970, the average family size in the U.S. has dropped by 16 percent, while the size of the average newly constructed single family home has increased by 48 percent. While the environment in this country may be benefiting from our focus on protection, we may simply be transferring the costs of our consumption to other environments. Over the last decade, National Forest timber harvests have dropped by 70 percent while softwood lumber imports from Canada have increased by 50 percent. Much of the increase in Canadian lumber imports came from native old-growth boreal forests in northern Quebec. The increased harvesting of Quebec's

forests and the associated environmental consequences have become a public issue there.

And around and around we go. How can we learn to see the connection between our consumption and our consumption's impact on the resources we care for so dearly?

Last year the USDA/Forest Service and the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters embarked on a project that would bring together some 20 representatives from all areas of forest use and conservation—from loggers and environmentalists to academics, nonprofit groups, a paper industry representative, and even a theologian—to address the paradox of consumption and conservation. The Intelligent Consumption Project (ICP) grew out of the Academy's 1999 conference on Aldo Leopold, which was funded in part by the USDA/Forest Service. After the conference, then-chief Michael Dombeck provided a grant to the Academy through the Forest Products Laboratory in Madison to explore the role that informed consumer choices can and should play in shaping conservation policy and practice, and ultimately in shaping our landscape.

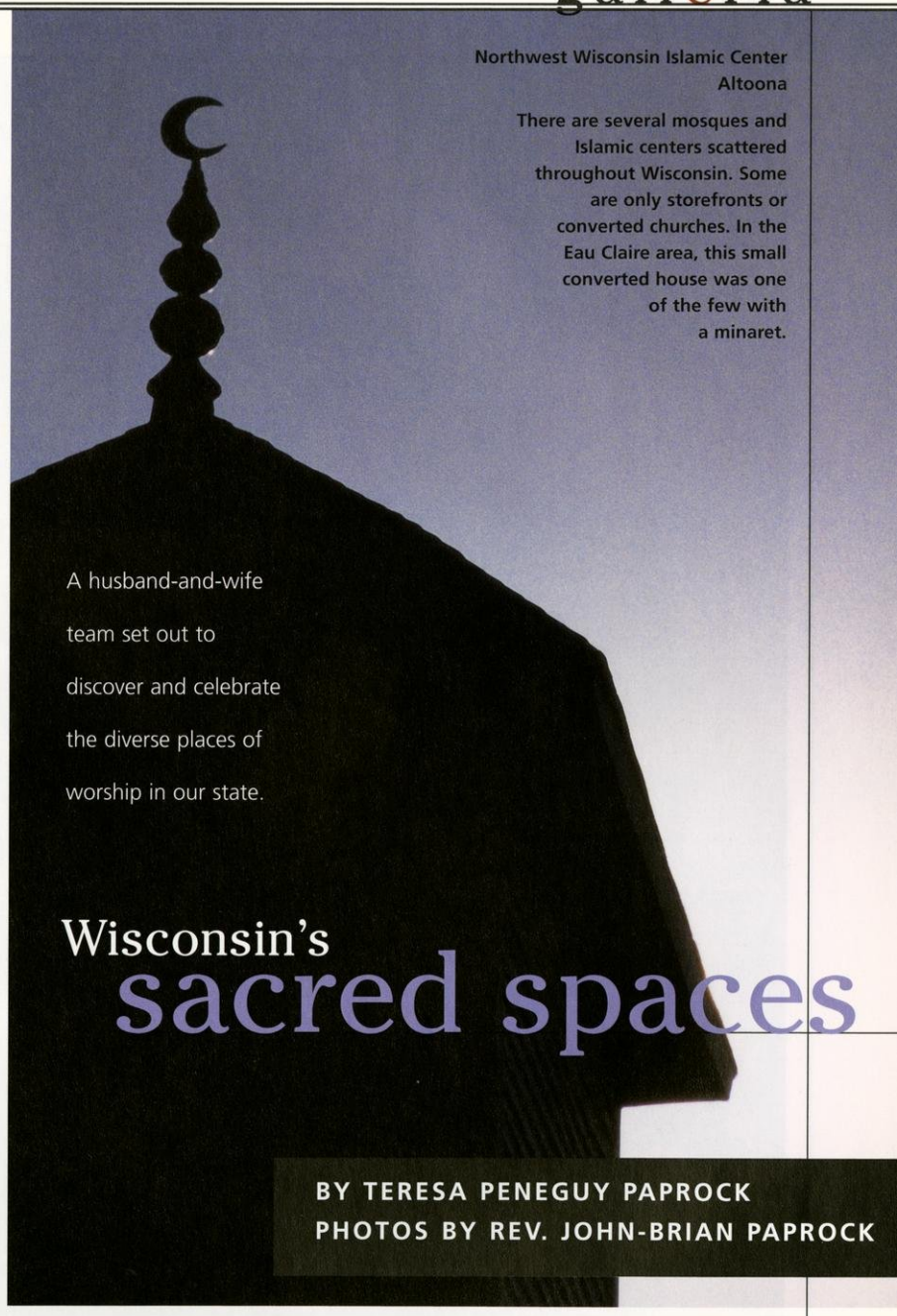
After 18 months and eight meetings around the country, ICP participants have issued a report on their findings and recommendations. The more noteworthy include:

- "Intelligent consumption" must be taught and practiced on many fronts, specifically covering these five areas: ethics and moral authority; technical and scientific information; research and development; public education; and institutional barriers and incentives.
- Educational materials about an intelligent consumption ethic must avoid the "language of shame and guilt" that so often marks messages regarding ethics and the environment.
- A National Materials Commission should be established to develop a national materials policy and provide guidance on research supporting intelligent consumption. We also need a credible, independent clearinghouse for authoritative information on the environmental effects of materials use, and an easily understood rating system to provide consumer information about consumption impacts.
- Promote producer "take-back" laws that would make the producer (and the consumer, through a higher product price) responsible for the cost of product disposal and/or recycling once the consumer discards the product. Such laws are gaining ground in Europe.
- Abandon the "one material at a time" approach to conservation and instead consider the larger picture. Reducing wood consumption alone, for example, could be highly damaging to the environment if we merely substitute for wood another raw material.

See our website, www.wisconsinacademy.org, for the full report, or contact us at the phone/e-mail address below to receive a free copy ($2.50 for postage and handling).

Michael Strigel is the Wisconsin Academy's director of programs. You can reach him at 608/263-1692 ext. 11 or by e-mail at mstrigel@facstaff.wisc.edu

pilgrim's progress



Northwest Wisconsin Islamic Center
Altoona

There are several mosques and Islamic centers scattered throughout Wisconsin. Some are only storefronts or converted churches. In the Eau Claire area, this small converted house was one of the few with a minaret.

A husband-and-wife team set out to discover and celebrate the diverse places of worship in our state.

Wisconsin's sacred spaces

BY TERESA PENEGUY PAPROCK
PHOTOS BY REV. JOHN-BRIAN PAPROCK

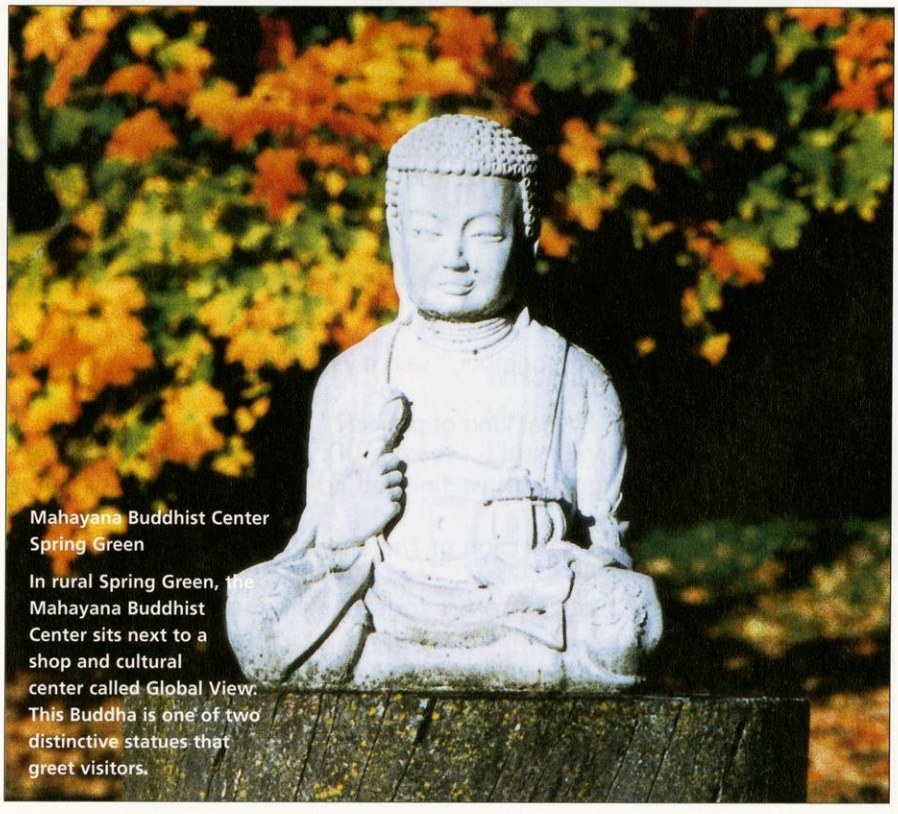
"Let's do a project together," said my husband.

"Okay," I said. "What kind of project?"

John-Brian and I had just finished co-writing an article for the "Faith and Values" section of *The Capital Times* in Madison. What if we did a bigger project together, like a book? He'd been thinking about researching places of religious significance in the state of Wisconsin. I imagined a simple book about quaint little churches, and decided a project like that would be fun.

Big Springs
(or Spirit Springs)
UW Arboretum
Madison

Legend says that healing waters flow from this spring, and that it is the first to turn green in the area. The photograph was taken in early March, and it was indeed green while everything else was still brown.



Mahayana Buddhist Center
Spring Green

In rural Spring Green, the Mahayana Buddhist Center sits next to a shop and cultural center called Global View. This Buddha is one of two distinctive statues that greet visitors.

We'd make a good team: I've been a journalist for close to 15 years, and John-Brian is a Christian minister with a deep commitment to open dialogue between people of all religious traditions. (A few years ago he published *A Guide to Spiritual and Religious Resources of South Central Wisconsin*.) Within a few months we had a contract with Trails Books—an honor for a first book. And what started as a quaint little project would wind up being a true pilgrimage for both of us.

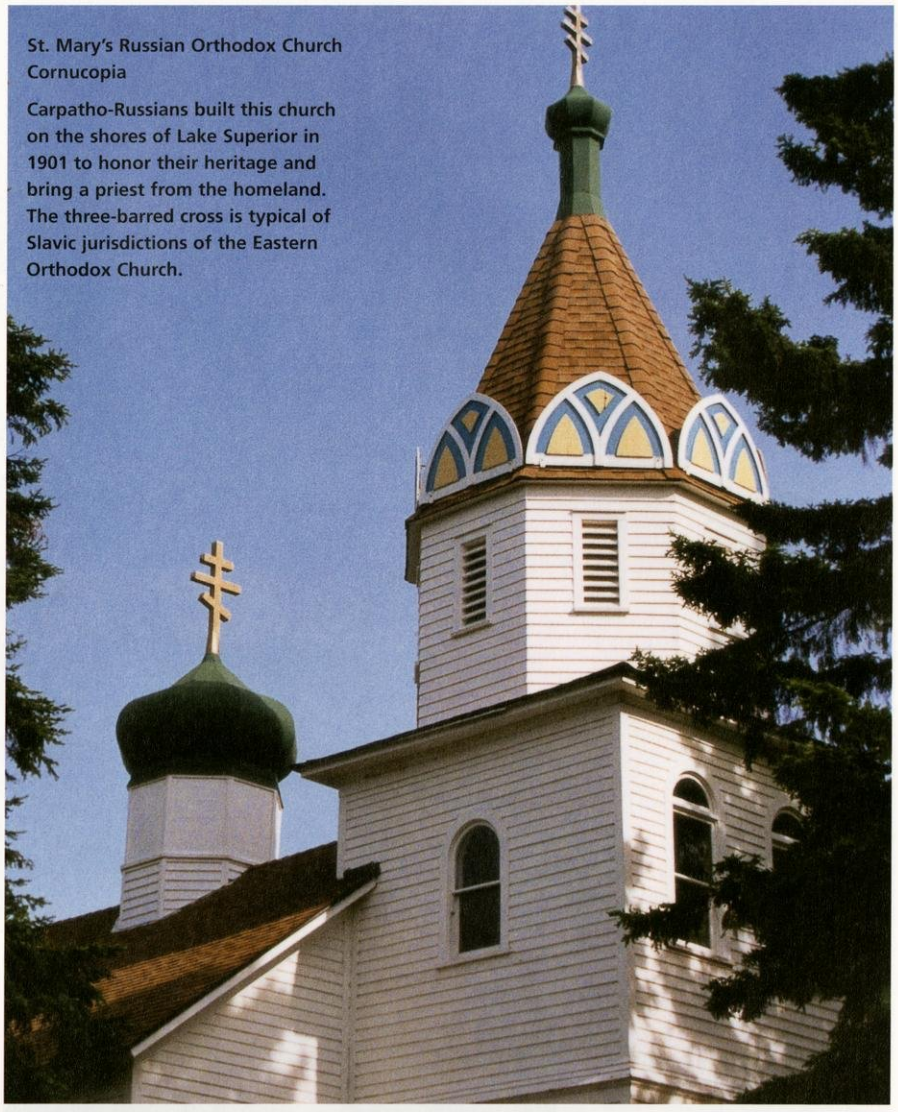
Over the next several months, John-Brian and I would travel approximately 9,000 miles of Wisconsin roads and would visit nearly 500 sacred places representing many religious traditions. We would sit cross-legged with a Sikh teacher in a Milwaukee *gudwara* and contemplate the source of inner peace. We would pray with Franciscan nuns at the Perpetual Adoration Chapel in La Crosse, where the sisters have kept a 24-hour-a-day vigil for 123 years. We would spend an afternoon traipsing though the northeast woods with a retired farmer who

believes his land was once the home of an advanced Indian civilization that built "Wisconsin's Stonehenge."

What is a sacred place? We found a pat definition elusive. It is hard enough to define the words "religion" or "spirituality." Try to explain, and you find an exception here, an overgeneralization there; almost any description comes up wanting.

It's even harder to wrap yourself around the idea of sacred space. As we envisioned it, a sacred space is a place where humanity meets the divine in a special way. "Thin places," the ancient Celts called them—places where the veil that separates our world from the spirit world is almost transparent. The most obvious example in the American culture is a church, but not all churches feel like sacred spaces. There is some truth in the oft-repeated refrain by people who don't like to go to church: "I can find God by taking a walk in the woods." To Native Americans, for example, all the earth is sacred.

In the beginning I actually wondered if we'd be able to find enough sites to fill up a whole book. But I needn't have worried. From researching library books, Internet sites, Wisconsin Historical Society documents, and other sources, we came up with a database of more than 900 sites. We finally settled on three criteria for possible inclusion in our book. To be considered, a site had to be

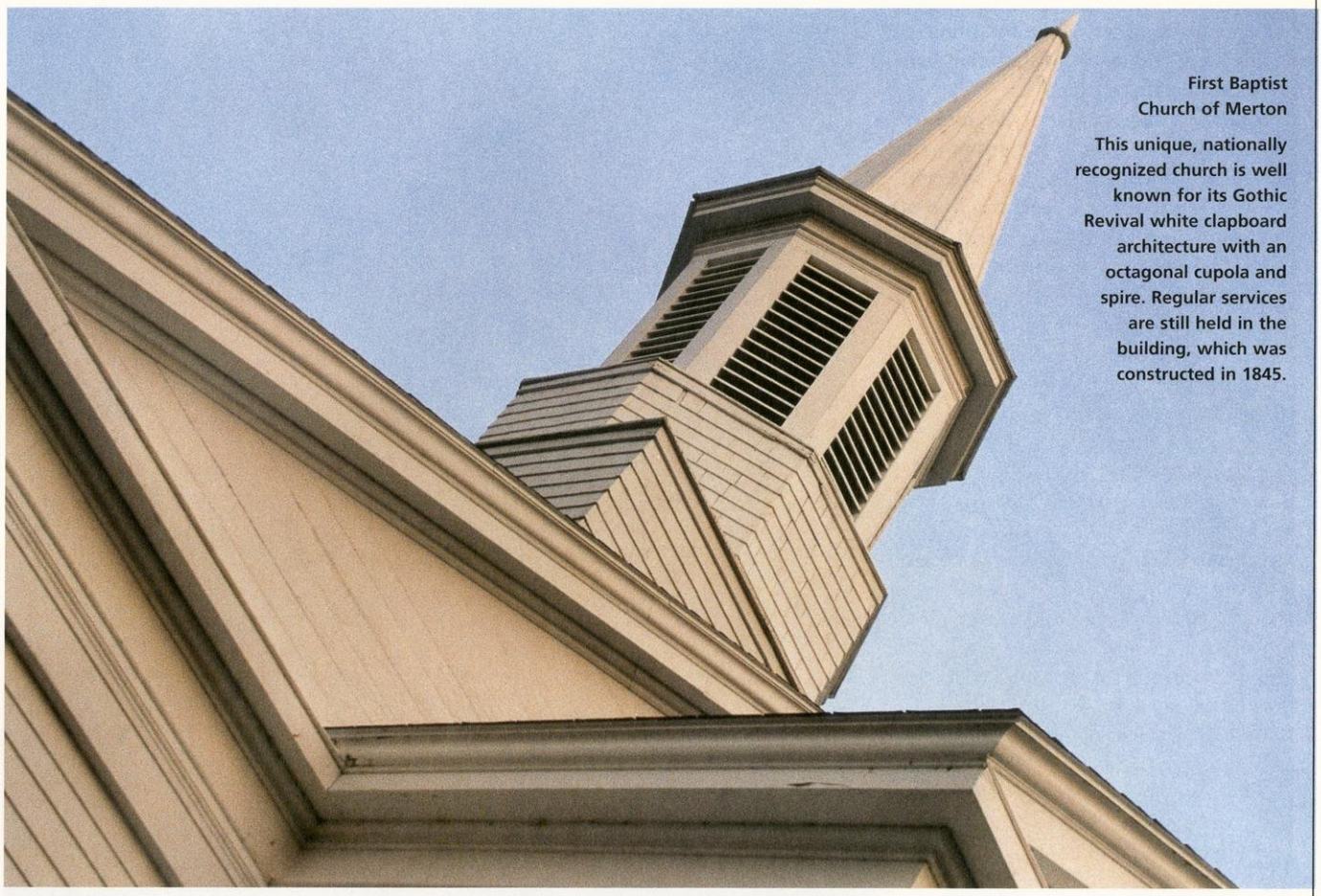


St. Mary's Russian Orthodox Church
Cornucopia

Carpatho-Russians built this church on the shores of Lake Superior in 1901 to honor their heritage and bring a priest from the homeland. The three-barred cross is typical of Slavic jurisdictions of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

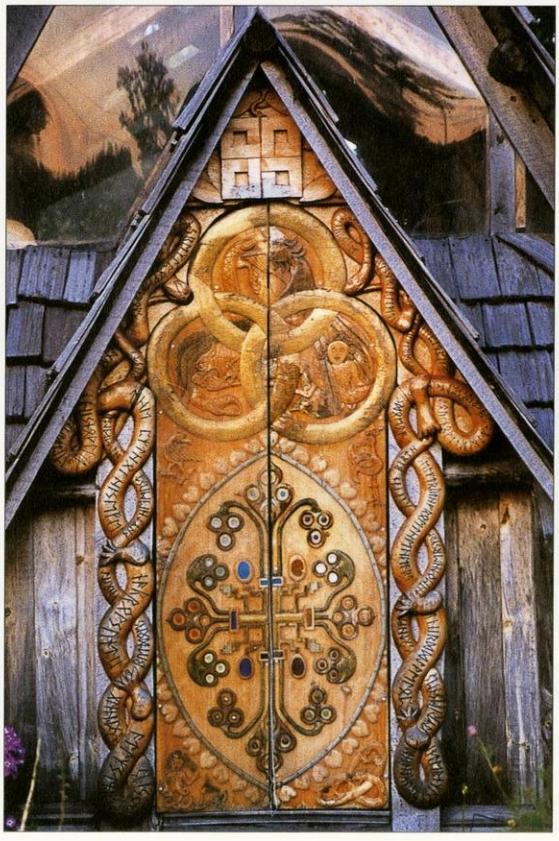
Krug-Senn Site
Rural Campbellsport

This carved stone with its striking face is one of many unusual stones at this site. Some are laid in patterns that resemble circles, spirals, effigies, and a large medicine wheel. This place is also known as "Wisconsin's Stonehenge."



First Baptist Church of Merton

This unique, nationally recognized church is well known for its Gothic Revival white clapboard architecture with an octagonal cupola and spire. Regular services are still held in the building, which was constructed in 1845.



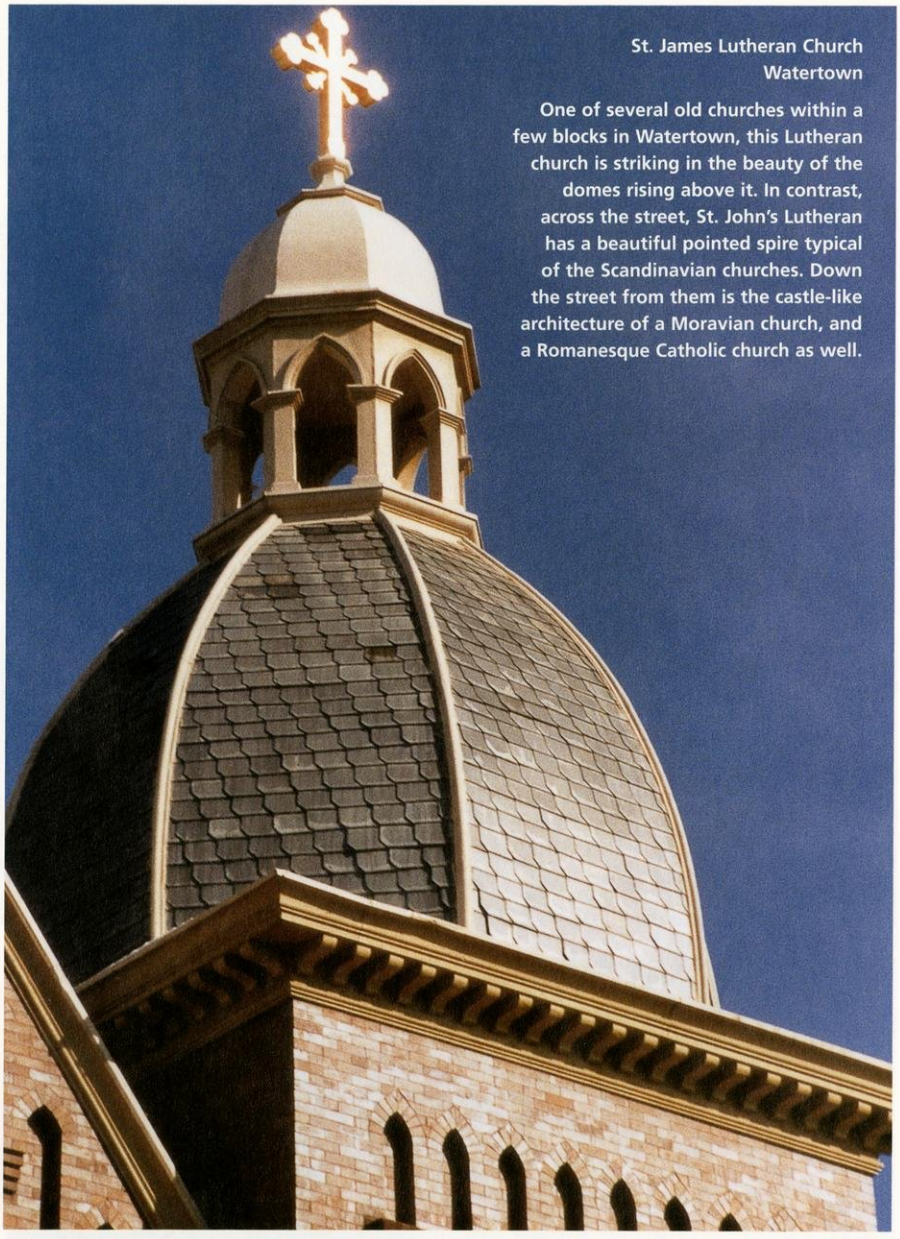
Norwegian Garden Chapel (Door detail) Egg Harbor

This garden chapel was actually reconstructed in Egg Harbor next to an antique shop on Highway 42. Similar to the Stavkirke, this has no Christian symbolism but rather has many pagan mythical symbols carved in a traditional manner.

seen as sacred by a group (or groups) of people; it had to have some historical significance; and/or it had to be unique in some way. This is how we pared down the list to a mere 700 sites, about 500 of which we would visit in person.

From the beginning, we knew our book would be as religiously inclusive as possible. While we were coming from the Eastern Orthodox Christian perspective, we both have a deep respect for all spiritual traditions. One can be firmly rooted in a religious tradition and still recognize the common thread that runs through all expressions of faith. We wanted to reflect the surprisingly diverse religious makeup of Wisconsin, and we would not leave a tradition out of the book because we disagreed with its theology. Christians of many denominations, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, pagans, and others would be represented.

At the same time, there was no attempt to include every site—to do so would require a mammoth volume. So



St. James Lutheran Church
Watertown

One of several old churches within a few blocks in Watertown, this Lutheran church is striking in the beauty of the domes rising above it. In contrast, across the street, St. John's Lutheran has a beautiful pointed spire typical of the Scandinavian churches. Down the street from them is the castle-like architecture of a Moravian church, and a Romanesque Catholic church as well.

we developed a rating system. Once we visited each site, we rated it in terms of its historic relevance, uniqueness, aesthetic beauty, and intrinsic value—what we called the "wow" factor. And so we pared the list down further to the approximately 300 sites that would be included in the book.

Of course, all our ratings were subjective, especially the "wow" factor. "Wow" was an attempt to describe the indescribable, to measure the spiritual impact of a given place. We found that feeling in a wide variety of settings. For example, I had the same "wow" response at Milwaukee's St. Josephat's Basilica, a golden and glittering monument to faith that features one of the largest domes in the world, as I did at the tiny Hague Log Church outside Perry township, a now-vacant, 18-by-18-foot wooden chapel built by Norwegian Lutheran immigrants in the 1850s. As different as they were from each other, the sense of the determination, humility, and sacrifices of the worshippers was the same for both.

Congregation Beth Israel
Glendale

Brought to Milwaukee from Eastern Europe in the 19th century, this 18th-century Torah is one of many treasures of Judaica in this conservative synagogue.

Not shown here, but well worth seeing, is the *Kristallnacht* Torah at Eman-El B'Ne Jeshurun (Zibler campus) in Milwaukee. It is one of the actual Torahs to survive *Kristallnacht* ("Night of Broken Glass"), the pogrom in Germany that marked the beginning of the Holocaust. If you look closely, you can see burn marks.

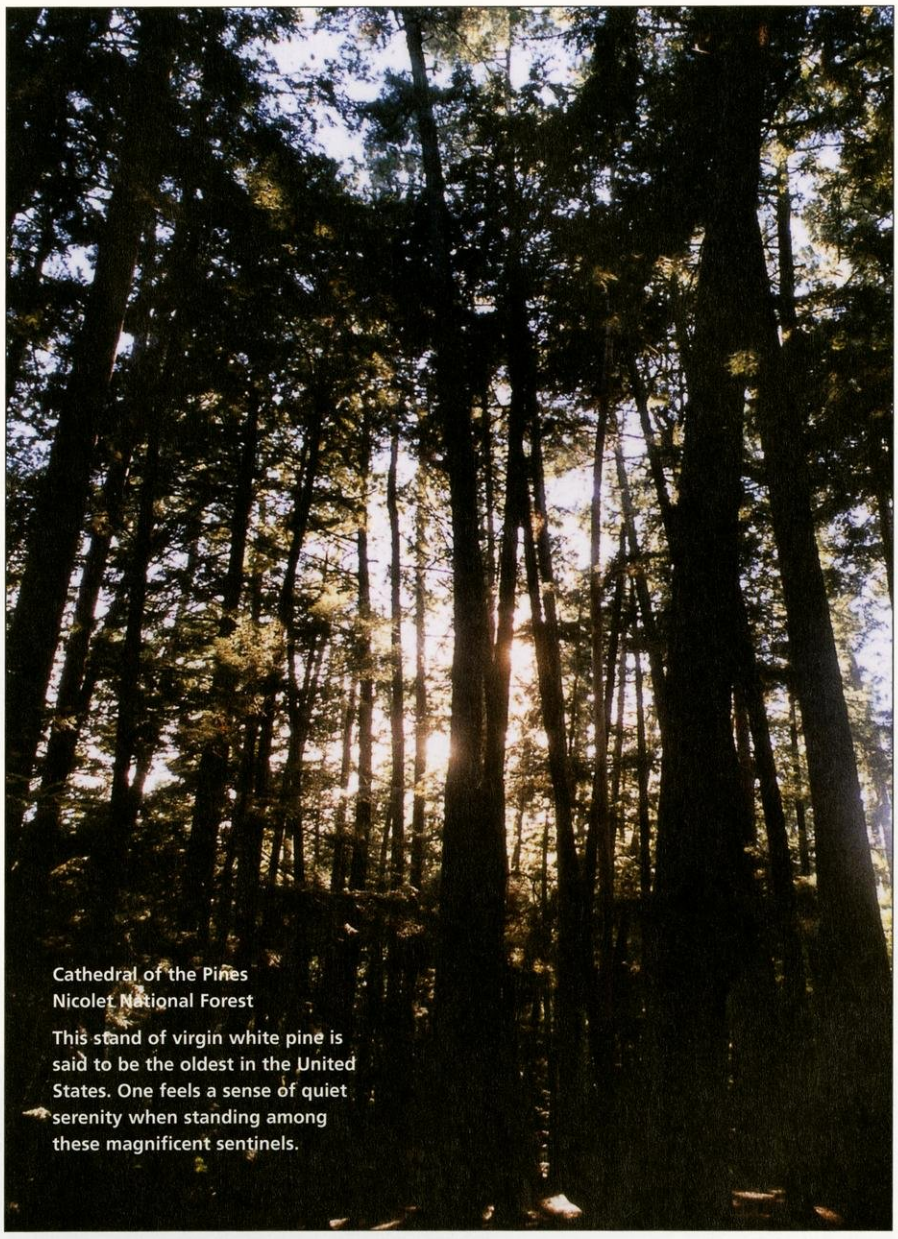
Circle Sanctuary
Barneveld

High on a hill above the trail of various pagan shrines is the ceremonial stone circle—the Circle Shrine—at Circle Sanctuary pagan community. Visitors and community members have left tokens and totems of various earth energies. Among these was a carved "Green Man" (below) that seemed content with his place in the circle.

SURPRISING DIVERSITY

Although most of the people who have ever lived in Wisconsin have been either Native American or Roman Catholic (and our book would reflect this fact), the sheer diversity of spiritual expression in Wisconsin would come as a surprise. The Native Americans have maintained their spiritual practices; European immigrants and their descendants have kept traditions from their homelands alive for generations; and new populations from Asia and the Middle East have brought their practices with them. In addition, Wisconsin has a progressive, even wild streak. Many movements that were new or unusual in their time, such as Spiritualism, Mormonism, and paganism, found substantial growth here.

Some of the most impressive structures of religious significance are not buildings at all, but rather earthen mounds shaped like animals. Most Wisconsinites don't know that our state is unique in having effigy mounds—while conical (burial) mounds can be found throughout North America, effigy (ani-



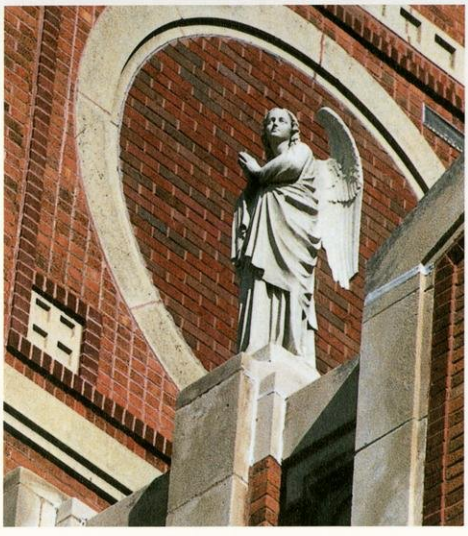
Cathedral of the Pines
Nicolet National Forest

This stand of virgin white pine is said to be the oldest in the United States. One feels a sense of quiet serenity when standing among these magnificent sentinels.

mal-shaped) mounds are found almost exclusively within the state of Wisconsin. They include bears, deer, birds, lizards, and mythical beasts.

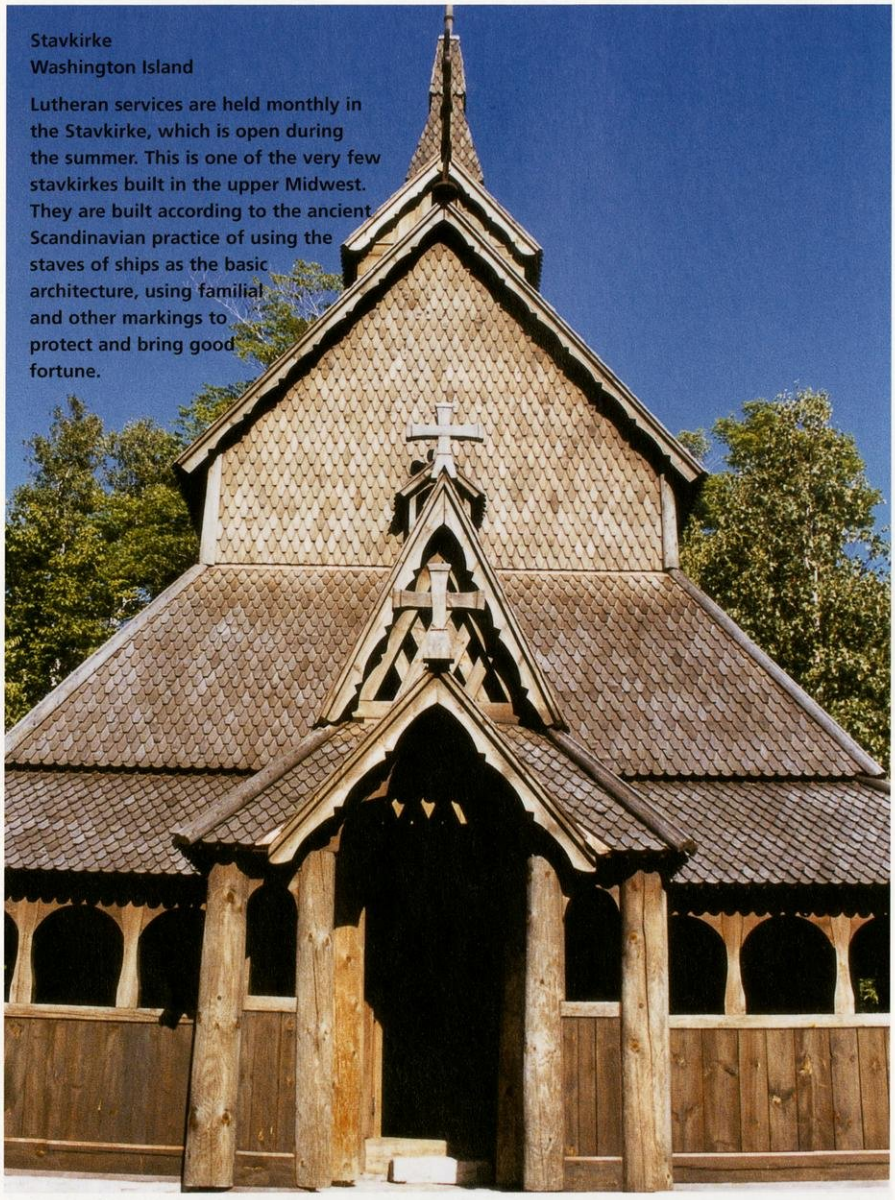
In truth, no one knows who built the mounds or what they mean, although theories and suppositions abound. Whatever their origin, it is impossible to visit the mounds and not be moved. At Lizard Mound Park in Washington County I felt a deep and profound sadness, and found myself asking for forgiveness for anything my ancestors may have done to harm the Native Americans. Out of respect, John-Brian and I would sprinkle tobacco at the mounds.

Our sacred sites included not only human-made structures but natural wonders as well. The Kickapoo Indian Caverns in Wauzeka were carved by an underground river that was part of a 400-million-year-old seabed. One section of the cave is shaped like a giant cathedral; so many people have gotten married there that a huge wooden cross has been hung. Cathedral of Pines in the Nicolet National Forest contains some of the



Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Roman Catholic Church
Pulaski

In the center of Pulaski is this very large Polish Catholic church adorned with beautiful stained glass and statuary. This angel is high above one of three entrances at the front of the church.



Stavkirke
Washington Island

Lutheran services are held monthly in the Stavkirke, which is open during the summer. This is one of the very few stavkirkes built in the upper Midwest. They are built according to the ancient Scandinavian practice of using the staves of ships as the basic architecture, using familial and other markings to protect and bring good fortune.

tallest, oldest virgin pines in North America. A visitor can sit on a wooden bench and look straight up at branches that seem to reach to the heavens.

Water has great spiritual significance for many traditions, and Wisconsin has abundant bodies of water—springs, rivers, lakes, waterfalls. Along the south shore of Lake Wingra in Dane County is the Spirit Spring, and the vicinity is said to be the first area in the region to turn green every spring. In and around Waukesha are some 50 springs said to have special healing powers. And there's Devil's Lake near Baraboo—really a misnomer, since the Indian name translates to something like "Spirit Lake." The Native Americans recognized the area's spectacular beauty and considered it especially blessed by the Great Spirit.

I never expected that I would be on a pilgrimage in my lifetime; I had no plans to travel to Fatima or to Mecca. What I discovered while researching our book was that there are places of pilgrimage all over this beautiful state. People here have found countless ways to honor the divine; they have employed their hearts and minds in amazing ways in an effort to reach out and touch the face of God. It is our hope that those who read the words and see the images we've collected will experience the "thin places" and feel the spirit calling them to make pilgrimages of their own.

Teresa Peneguy Paprock is editor and marketing coordinator at the Energy Center of Wisconsin, and freelances for a number of Wisconsin publications.
Rev. John-Brian Paprock is priest–pastor of Holy Transfiguration Orthodox Church of the East in Madison and founder of Inroads Interfaith Ministries.

"Sacred Places" Book and Exhibit

Trails Books will publish *Sacred Sites of Wisconsin*, by Rev. John-Brian Paprock and Teresa Peneguy Paprock, in September 2001. It will be available for $18.95 at most bookstores, or you can order it from:

Trails Media Group, Inc.
P.O. Box 317
1131 Mills Street
Black Earth, WI 53515
Tel. 608/767-8000
www.trailsbooks.com

A *Sacred Places—Sacred Spaces* photo exhibit will begin touring in August at the Madison Civic Center Crossroads Gallery, 122 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin. Other destinations include:

September through October
St. Benedict Center Gallery, Middleton

November through December
Madison Christian Community and Labyrinth, Madison

January through February 2002
DeKoven Center Gallery, Racine

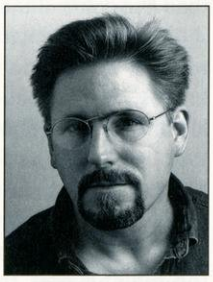
For future venues, call 608/236-9622.

For a preview of the exhibit, go to:
www.angelfire.com/wi/inroads/sites.html

WISCONSIN ACADEMY REVIEW SHORT STORY CONTEST WINNER

FIRST PLACE

Morton and Lilly, Dredge and Fill



BY C. J. HRIBAL

PHOTOS BY BILL BLANKENBURG

Morton and Lilly Brunner had been had, but they weren't going to admit that, not even to themselves. Morton and Lilly's house was on a spur of raised marshland behind the train tracks that unevenly bisected the south end of Black Otter Lake, then ran into town behind the loading docks for the canning factory, the toy factory, the feed mill and the lumber yard. Theirs was a relatively new ranch in a subdivision built on ground too wet for housing.

THEY HAD GOTTEN IN LATE on the development of the lakefront, and by the time they were ready to buy there was only marsh to build on. They built anyway. To compensate for the lack of drainage their contractor scotched the full basement, put in a half basement big enough for a sump pump, and extended the foundation an extra four yards, giving them a concrete pad out back for a deck, which the marsh was slowly reclaiming. What Morton and Lilly owned, then, besides some of the best mosquito breeding grounds in the county, was an expensive rectangular box parked on a slab of cracking concrete with a view of the Northwestern and Central train trestle. The rail bed, like their yard, was raised to get it above the marsh. Fifty yards of cattails and marsh grass separated them from the raised railbed and it was another fifty to the weed-choked water. Scattered about were mounds of the leftover trucked-in fill for the berms and the dredged piles of lake muck that were now being settled by birch and staghorn sumac and whatever weeds had found a toehold. Porter Atwood sold them that view as a picturesque windbreak and perhaps a sound barrier to the twice-daily train. It used to be lake here, too, but that was choked off and filled in years ago: fertilizer runoff from nearby farms caused an explosion of algae and grass. What was now Morton and Lilly's back yard and their broken deck used to be navigable water. More mounds of colonized muck there. There was no pier on the little bay behind them—too shallow, too mushy. They had to walk over the mounds of fill to the train trestle or drive back to Roosevelt to see the water they've built so close to.

Morton has just returned from the beer shed at Veterans Park, and is standing now on his crumbling slab of deck, the edges of it green with mold, clumps of chickweed erupting from the fissures that seem wider every spring. It's Homecoming Weekend down at Veterans Park, and he's wishing he'd stayed there, drinking beer with his buddies and hitting on women he knew in high school. Rita Sabo especially, though she made it clear she wanted no part of him. He figured maybe for old time's sake. I used to date your sister, he told her, like that should be an argument in his favor. Date. He'd had to say date. That wasn't the half of it, what all they'd done, but he was trying to be polite. Didn't that count for anything? He was asking polite, it being public and all. He didn't know why he was wasting his time. Then he looked at Rita laughing as she sauntered away, her slim hips moving back and forth in her jeans and he knew why. Everybody knew why. I want me a piece of that, he'd told his friend Byron Joe Gunther.

"Everybody wants a piece of that," Byron Joe had answered. "It's between the wantin' and the gettin', there's the rub, ainna?"

"So I'm gettin' a piece of that," said Morton.

"You and whose army?" answered Byron Joe.

Why do they call it Homecoming? Morton wonders. Who leaves? Nobody. And the ones that do never come back. It's the ones who don't leave who go every year. They ought to call it Homestaying Weekend. He thinks about this as he twists the top off another long-neck. If only he weren't married, he thinks. If only he hadn't been forced into marrying Lilly. He wouldn't have done it if she hadn't appealed to his better nature. He's a softie in matters of the heart. Always has been. She caught him in a weak, unthinking moment, and the rest, as they say, is history. God, but he loathes her.

The psychology of the large does not apply to him and Lilly. Their deck furniture consists of those metal scallop-backed chairs cantilevered over a base of U-shaped tubing. The chairs are permanently tipped backwards, the leg tubing having succumbed over time to Morton's and Lilly's weight. No matter. Here in this enclave of ranch houses plunked down on fill and lake muck, their sump pump constantly going, wheezing out dribbles of water only to have it percolate back into their basement, Morton and Lilly Brunner act like smaller people. There's a plastic fawn grazing on the weeds where it gets too wet to mow, and hummingbird feeders are attached to the picture windows behind their heads. Lilly is sitting like a potted plant in one of the chairs, its metal laboring to support her, and she's doing needlepoint under the bug lights. A bug zapper is glowing purple behind her, zitzing moths and mosquitos into oblivion with great regularity. Lilly's needlepoint is of leprechauns dancing beneath a rainbow. She's working on the pot of gold coins now, which look, because she's miscounted her stitches, more like pennies left out on the railroad tracks than like coins of the realm.

That doesn't matter, either. Anything round in her needlepoints—bears, babies, hot air balloons—all come out looking thin, malnourished. The balloons look like they're about to make a sudden descent through the bottom of the pillow, the babies look like those old-men infants common in 15th-century paintings. It's as though she sees the world as thinner than it is, as though something vital—the world's largeness, perhaps?—was already squeezed out of it.

Manette speaks

Novelist and contest judge
A. Manette Ansay on the top winner

The first place winner, "Morton and Lilly, Dredge and Fill," was the most fully realized of the six finalist stories I was asked to read and evaluate. The writer begins by describing Morton and Lilly's house and yard, "an expensive rectangular box parked on a slab of cracking concrete" which "the marsh was slowly reclaiming." Lilly is a size 24 on a good day, a 26 or 28 on a bad day, and when her husband, Morton, tells her she looks like a sausage cooked inside its own casing, she glances up from the leprechauns she's been embroidering to say, "Maybe somebody should poke me then, let them juices flow." A funny line—and there are many—but even early in the story, it is clear that something more is at stake. A lesser writer would have been content to explain the malice between this aging couple in the usual ways. And yes, these elements do appear: Morton's infidelity, Lilly's regrets over not having a child. But there is a second story, a secret story, beating like the telltale heart beneath the cracked concrete slab that supports Morton and Lilly's fragile life together, and its revelation creates a truly resonant and original closure.

This extends to her clothing. She's a 24 on her good days, a 26 or a 28 on her bad ones, which are frequent enough to seem permanent, but what she buys are 22s that sit in her closet unused, or she squirms herself inside the too-small clothing so that it seems as though her arms are bursting from her blouse sleeves, her belly from her waistband, her thighs from her slacks. Morton sometimes will say she looks like a sausage cooked inside its own casing. Well, she says, maybe somebody should poke me then, let them juices flow. She's hoping he wasn't just being mean, was being playful, too, but often as not he'll look away right then, and the message is clear: nobody, he thinks, would like to poke her, least of all her husband.

As she's gotten older she's gotten short of breath as well. So she sits a lot, and does needlepoint, and often puts that aside to look at the crane flies trying to find a way to make a safe landing on the bug lights. They're so skinny, those flies, she bets they're unkind to their kids. She and Morton have never had children. She's not sure if there's a regret in that or not. There used to be, but she thinks it's gone away now. If they had kids it would have been when Morton was . . . But she won't allow her thinking to go there. She remembers trying to get pregnant all those years. Once or twice it seemed like she was, but her doctor told her, no, it was just that as large as she was she shouldn't expect to be regular. The thought crossed her mind once that God was punishing her for having married Morton by getting him to believe she was pregnant, but she dismissed that notion. It required her to think of God as being ironic and mean, and she didn't want to believe that. It would mean God was too much like her husband.

If they had had kids they'd be in high school now. She's sorry now they didn't. She and Morton—Morton especially—did a lot of stupid things and not getting pregnant was one of them. Though it's not the kids themselves she misses; it's the not having had them. Her friends with kids are almost through having them. They're talking about trips they'll make without the kids, things they'll do, places they'll see. She and Morton have always had that but they never went anywhere. She wonders, if they had gone anywhere, would it be different from having gone after your kids are grown, gone, she means, with the knowledge that you're going without your kids versus going never having had any? It probably is different. It's probably better.

Life can be so unfair. Even that Sabo woman was just about done raising hers, and for her friends it seems as though it's a part of every conversation: what the kids did, how they are, who they're dating now, what they're thinking now for after high school—a big rash of graduations this spring, and she and Morton went to a lot of parties; they were like an extra set of parents, only their kids didn't really exist, and Muffy, their miniature schnauzer, was just so dear but nobody saw her like they did and it was embarrassing to keep bringing up Muffy's antics when everybody else was discussing children so after a while she just kept quiet about it.

It just didn't seem fair, the way some women dropped children like they were bon-bons and she and Morton . . . She tries to concentrate on the leprechaun's foot. His face bore a curiously sad expression for someone who's just discovered a pot of gold coins, even if they were a little lopsided. It must be the light. He would look better once she took him inside.

That Sabo woman. And her sister, whom Morton had . . . She doesn't want to think about that either. That was a long time ago. She sets her needlepoint aside, looks over at Morton. He's drinking a Miller Lite and looking at the piles of dredge and fill that obscure their view of the lake. And he's been telling her about his run-in with Rita Sabo at Homecoming.

She should have been there. That woman wouldn't have dared bother Morton if she'd been there. She wouldn't have talked to Morton if she'd been there. That Sabo woman shut up around her. One thing that Sabo woman respected was a baleful glare. Her husband, too. It wasn't a one-way street. Nothing ever was with Morton, even if he said it was. He'd been drinking, too. No doubt he looked approachable. As big as he was now, women still found him attractive. They still came on to him. She knew that. When he was drinking he'd tell her things. She'd gotten used to this early in their marriage—his refusal to share intimacies with her (his refusal to be intimate with her) unless he was drunk. Then he told her everything. So he'd been drinking hardy this evening or he wouldn't be telling her any of this now. How that Sabo woman—she was in her cups pretty good, too, he reasoned—had just come up to him in the beer shed and started badgering him about her sister. That, anyway, is what Morton wants her to believe. Because no matter what she tells herself, the fact is Morton makes up things. He tells stories. He was like a nine-year-old boy in that way still. Catch him with his Mr. Doodly outside his pants, a wrench in one hand and an unconscious woman beneath him and he was as likely to say "she made me do it" as anything. His explanations rang false, always, and while she might believe that Sabo woman had started the conversation this evening, once Morton opened up his own mouth to say so she had to throw that belief in the trash with all the other ones she'd ever held or cherished about her Morton. Her Morton—that was good for a laugh. He had always considered himself on loan to her, and she knew that, marriage vows or no. And even now, some twenty years after they'd first said I do, Morton didn't. It makes her angry, and when she picks up her needlepoint again she stabs the leprechaun's feet with quick flustered angry jabs that are the real cause of his dancing. If you look closely, the leprechaun isn't grinning at all. He is gritting his teeth. Which is what Lilly is doing now as Morton holds forth on how he had explained everything, once again, yet one more time again, not that it did any good, to that Sabo woman.

"And did she believe you?"

"She doesn't believe anybody. She could have seen it happening and she wouldn't believe it. Betty Sabo herself would have to come back from the dead and explain it to her for her to buy what I was saying to her."

"And what did you say?"

Morton finishes his beer and goes back inside for another Miller Lite. He throws the twist-off cap into the marsh. The empty he leaves by the picture window's sliding glass door. He won't pick up after himself if you put a gun to

his head. "Same old same old. She don't listen. Never has."

"There was a boy drowned over by the subdivision yesterday." Lilly doesn't know why she offers this bit of information, only she's tired of Morton's lying and she wants to change the subject, and this seemed to fit the bill. Never mind that Morton will find a way to get that conversational train back on track.

Morton has a long pull on his beer, sits on another green lawn chair that looks like a sea shell. Its tubing creaks under his weight. "I heard about it. The story is he got himself tangled up and stayed under."

"I was there, Morton."

"What are you saying? You went over to the subdivision and checked it out?" He can imagine Lilly doing this. Being the vicarious mom, putting trembling fingers to her lips as she contemplates the body of her drowned imaginary son. The horror, the horror. He wants to belch.

"I'm saying I was there that other time. I'm saying I'm tired of you making up stories about what did and did not happen. I'm saying I'm tired of that Sabo woman staring at me every shift for six or eight hours straight like she knows something I'm supposed to know but don't because you won't ever tell me." There. At least the train on the tracks now is hers.

"There's nothing to tell. You seen it."

Lilly stabs at the leprechaun and wonders about what she has seen. Twenty years ago, nearly—was it really that long ago? Seventeen, anyway. Then as now, Lilly and Morton and the Sabo sisters—there were two of them then—all worked at the Everfresh Canning Plant. Morton was a year-round employee, head of maintenance, and Lilly and her friend Lila and Rita Sabo all worked on the cook room floor. Betty Sabo worked over in labeling. Easy work, letting all those labels go by. A machine piddles two stripes of glue on the labels, the cans roll over them, and all you have to do is make sure the glue machines are cleaned and clog-free and full of glue and the labels are lining up straight. The women down at that end of the plant smoke cigarettes and chat as they watch the cans roll by them. They have plenty of time for foolishness. Plenty of time to seek out the younger, still boy-slender husbands of women who don't look so good, who might have a little weight problem, whose frames justify a little more meat on their bones. Only who understands that? Nobody, least of all their husbands. So their husbands chat up these silly women who have no real work to do. They spend time with them during their breaks, go out for beers with them after work, ignoring their own wives, who might like a fish dinner on a Friday night once in a while, too.

But no, there's no time for that. There's time for going out with the boys, and staying out till all hours, and never mind that some of the boys are women, no, never mind that, it's just, I'm sorry, honey, I'll be home late tonight, don't wait up, and don't worry, honey, we'll get around to a little evening out for ourselves one of these days, too.

Well, baloney. He wasn't fooling anyone. And she was going to prove it. One hot night when he said he had to work late she just waited until around midnight or so and took the other truck down to the plant to see. Sure enough, his truck was there and he was in it. In the truck's bed. With somebody. Her truck wheels crunching gravel, her lights off, they didn't hear her until she was right on top of them and she switched on the high beams. And then Morton swung his head round, jacklit like a deer, and then that head surfaced, that other head, Betty Sabo's head, and Morton, as though he could keep her from seeing what she'd already seen, smacked that head with the flat side of a wrench. She had seen that all right. She had seen plenty.

They carried her inside the plant—Morton had keys—and they set her down next to the cooling tank. That was where Morton said the party had been. And there were still bottles scattered around and water splashed over the side of the cooling tank as though a great many people had been frolicking. They set her down there, where she could sleep it off, and the day crew would find her if she didn't wake up early enough to leave by the side door.

So how did she get into the cooling tank? And why would she drown herself? These were questions Lilly would always stumble over, and when she wasn't thinking about them, there was the drowned woman's sister looking at her reproachfully, as though she had had a hand in doing something about it, which wasn't the case at all. She didn't know how these things happened, and she didn't want to know why, so why was God punishing her? Why was God making her live with the shame of something she hadn't done? No charges were filed. Why should they be? It was an accident, however that woman found herself in that tank. That woman was a wreck, a disaster waiting to happen. She probably did a balance beam act once she woke up and fell in and was too damn drunk to realize she was drowning. So why was that woman's sister always looking at her like she'd done it? She hadn't done anything. And Morton neither. He came home pretty much right away after she did. He just had to tidy up, he said. So stop looking at me, Rita Sabo! Just quit your godawful staring! And Morton! With his stories! He couldn't go out for a paper

without her thinking he was lying anymore. She was so furious. And now he was telling her that Sabo woman hit on him tonight. Well, maybe she had and maybe she hadn't.

They really should have had children. Everything would be different if they'd of had children.

"It was easier, you know, Morton, when Rita had that dazed look on her face. When all them kids of hers were little and she couldn't hardly breathe to keep up. But they're mostly grown now and she has time on her hands. She has time to think about things, Morton."

"So let her think. We didn't do anything."

"We didn't do anything? Of course we didn't do anything! It was you, you and her that did something. You didn't do anything. Maybe it slipped your mind how I found you?"

"You won't give that a rest, will you."

"I should give it a rest? I should just forget what I saw in those high beams? You with that woman in the back of your pickup? You with your pants off and a wrench in your hands? You cold-cocked her, Morton, like she was a heifer you didn't have any use for."

"Betty was fine when we left."

"When we left? No, when I left. I don't know how she was when you left."

"The same. She was the goddamn same!"

"She was propped up beside that tank when I went home."

"She was beside the tank when I left, too! Then I came back and there she was."

"So how'd she find her way inside? You think she walked into that tank and drowned?"

"How the hell should I know? You think I was her goddamn mother? I was her lover, dammit. Not her mother, her lover!"

"Stop shouting at me!"

But Morton can't stop. They'd been over this territory so many times in the days right after it happened, and then he'd shut up, and then the years of silence after, and always, always, always with Lilly holding this silent card on him, this trump card, like she knew what he'd done, like she'd been covering for him when she didn't know the first thing about anything. So now he is screaming at his wife, "I was her lover, okay? I was just her lover! Her goddamn lover!" until his wife is a quivering mass of jelly, and now she's weeping, hands over her eyes like she can't or doesn't want to see anything, blubbering, weeping, "Stop it, stop it! You don't know how much I loved you to put up with that much shame!"

Which is what stops him. He quiets himself. He had been about to heave his bottle into the field or smash it on the cement but he puts it down next to the needlepoint she'd dropped at her feet. That idiot leprechaun. Why is she crying? He puts his hand on her jelly-like shoulder and pats her hair. Quietly he says, "Jesus, woman, sometimes you drive me crazy. I poked her a few times, that was all. Nothing else ever passed between us, I swear."

"And how is that supposed to make me feel?"

"I never loved nobody but you."

"You didn't love her?"

He crouches down as low as his belly will allow. "How could I? I was married to you."

Lilly snuffles. He was lying but in some way she feels better. Nurtured by her twin beliefs. That he was lying—how could he not have loved his lover? But he was right, too—they were married, and that carried you over or through a lot of things. He could have loved Betty some but not completely. One love, the married love, could ride you over the other kind. One was finer, higher, than what you did out of base need. One was permanent, one was temporary. She had tried his belief in the furnace of her soul, and it had not been found wanting. It was stronger for being in the fire. She is glad of that, whatever else he has done to cause her shame. Through her sniffling and her tears she crinkles her eyes at him. Morton, her husband.

And Morton, her husband, looks out over the fill and the dredge piles, at the twisted limbs of sumac that grow out of their crowns, and knows she has won another round. She is wearing him down, she is, and what Morton feels is just like Peter after a long night that supposedly ends up in relief. You say what you need to to get yourself off the hook.

"I'll get ready for bed now," Lilly says, getting up and gathering her things—her leprechaun with its grimace and misshapen coins, her basket of yarn, her tea. "You'll be coming soon to me, yes?" she asks, and Morton nods assent before she slips into the house, a triumphant woman, sure of her womanliness, sure her husband will come to her soon and they will do the things husbands and wives do to each other in the privacy of their own bedrooms. He slides the screen door closed behind her and waves as she goes round the corner, down the hall to where she'll be waiting for him, freshly washed, freshly perfumed, her immenseness glowing in a flimsy rag of chiffon she liked to call her peignoir.

And then Morton Brunner picks up the bottle he'd set by her feet and throws it as hard as he can towards the lake that he knows is there but for the goddamn life of him can not see.

For more on author C. J. Hribal, please see the bio and interview in the Upfront section of the magazine (page 4) and a review of Hribal's latest book on page 50.

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The *Wisconsin Academy Review* Short Story Contest was sponsored by the Center for the Book and by the following Wisconsin members of Book Sense, a national league of independent booksellers:

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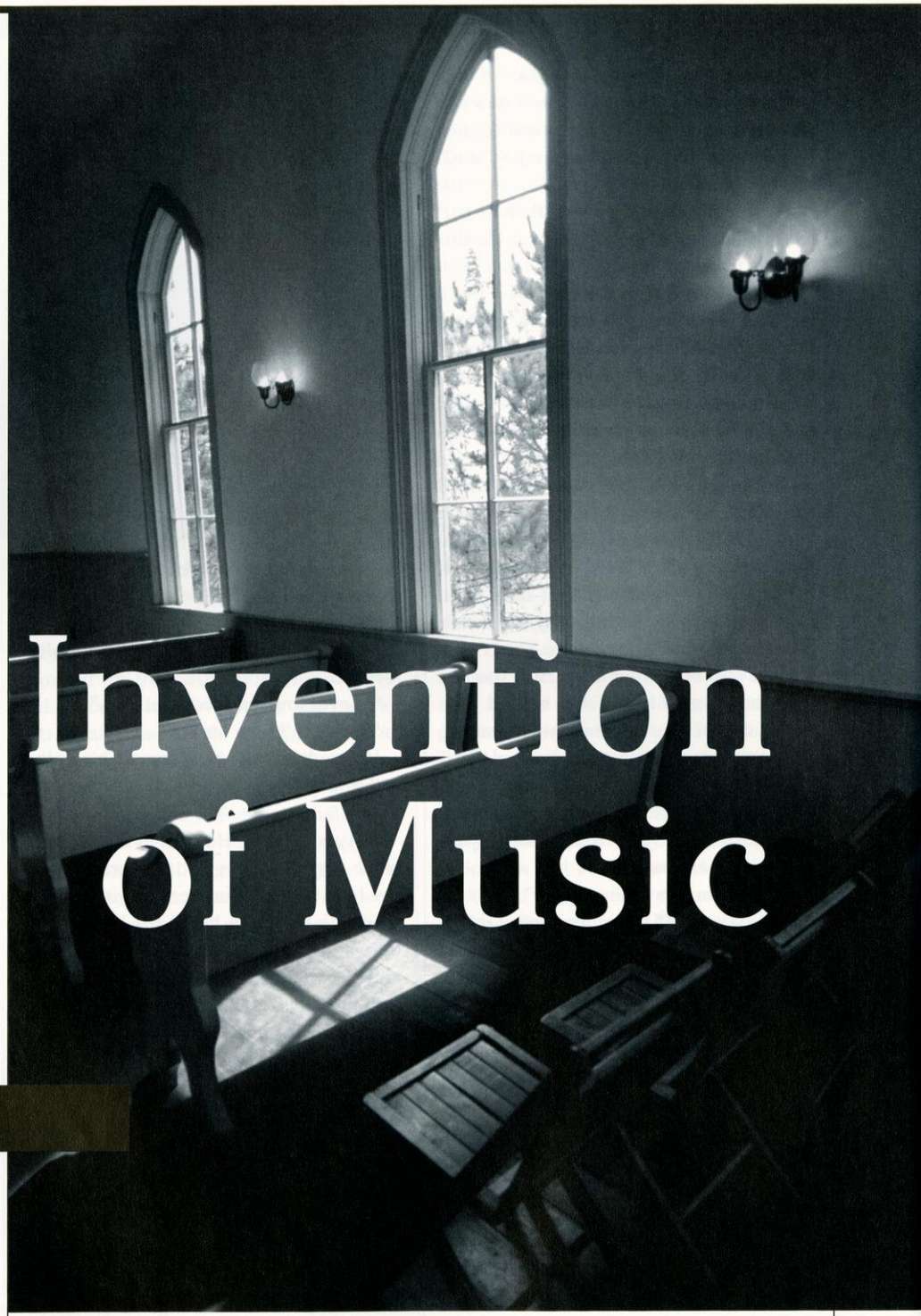
Look for our second-place story, "When You Don't Go to College," by Sara Swanson, in the fall edition of the *Wisconsin Academy Review*.

The Invention of Music



BY MICHELLE WILDGEN

PHOTO BY BILL BLANKENBURG

I was getting to be like those sly high school boys who used to try and slide their hands over me at parties and dances, as if I wouldn't notice. When I kissed him I waited to see if his hands would steal up to cradle my face, if he'd respond somehow. But he didn't move, and when I stopped kissing him the cool March air breathed between our bodies and the room was quiet.

I SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED as much. He'd gotten scrupulous since finding God.

It had only been two days since he cooked an ominously elaborate dinner for me and announced in the middle of it that he was going to be Catholic again. I sat there, looking at my plate, as shocked and hot-faced as if he had just confessed a secret marriage, a family hidden in a house around the corner.

"I always said this could happen," he had said. He wouldn't meet my eyes as he poured more wine. He was trying for sheepish but failing; he was joyous.

Then he told me, "I have to make some changes. I don't think I can justify what I've been doing just because it's pragmatic. Not when I know better. I mean, I'm not a teenager anymore."

As he spoke he leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table, gesturing with his fork. "And why make the decision to go back," he then asked me, very reasonably, "if I only do it selectively?"

He ate a small bite of risotto and savored it, and suddenly the memory of a sound came back to me: he had been humming while he cooked, a jaunty little melody that emanated from the kitchen as he stirred the rice for 45 minutes. I was still thinking about this as he leaned back in his chair and went on talking to me, explaining what he had to change.

So now we were in bed, picking our way past this sin and that. It was only afternoon but still I felt like a teenager who'd sneaked inside her boyfriend's bedroom late at night, haunted by an insomniac parent prowling the house. We didn't know what he was allowed to do. So he moved cautiously, his touch as light as a trickle of water.

It was at this point that I began to ask graphic questions. I did this under the pretext of establishing ground rules.

"What if I come and you don't?" I whispered.

"Am I helping you or watching?" he asked.

"Either one. Watching."

He sighed, a look of annoyance crossing his face. The bed was so large, but we were using the space to maintain distance instead of cover it. We lay there, facing each other with the white sheets bundled between us.

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Uselessly, I reached over to smooth the bedding that was bunched up between us. Perhaps the situation required stronger stuff. I ran a hand over the quilt and smoothed it down. Then I reached across it toward his body, but something blocked my hands. I could feel the resistance there, a long light bulk that was not the sheet, and suddenly it seemed as obvious as the watery spring light in the room that this god had lain himself down with us. Was it really so important to separate us, I wondered, and I tried again: I pushed my hands forward, watching his quiet face for guidance, and my open palms met with only a thickening of air.

Within weeks of his conversion I had begun to feel like a heathen for regretting the end of the secular Sundays. John now rose early and went to Mass with his damp blonde hair still showing the marks of his comb. When he kissed me hello upon returning, his breath still bearing a hint of wine and his skin smelling freshly of soap, I felt blowsy—still in bed when he had already been up and absolved for another seven days.

"You realize Christianity's a child," I informed him one such morning. It was astounding how peevish his church clothes made me. "It's been riding the coattails of Judaism for centuries."

"I think you're oversimplifying," John told me. He sipped his coffee calmly.

"No, oversimplifying is, 'Abortion is always wrong, no matter what,'" I told him.

Then I left him to finish breakfast and went into the living room to read. I had been to the library the previous day, borrowing books about religion. I had a notion of coming across a line in a book that would show his religion for the rigid fraud I thought it was. But secretly I also wondered what would happen if I came across something that appealed to me.

I already had thumbed through an essay on little-known village goddesses. My personal favorite was Shitala Mata, a goddess of smallpox. When smallpox disappeared, Shitala Mata was undeterred, and she took on the form of cholera and other illnesses. The author was adamant that Shitala Mata was not a demon, but sister and mother, who simply overstayed her time in some poor villager's body unless she was coaxed elsewhere, like an annoying relative on a profound scale.

Now, for post-breakfast reading I chose a book on ancient Egyptian religion from the stack on the coffee table and stretched out on my stomach on the carpet to read it. I could hear John on the phone in the kitchen, talking to one of his guitar students.

"Keep working on it," he said. "If your fingertips aren't gray and callused I'll know you aren't practicing."

He came into the living room and set a cup of tea next to me. After settling himself on the couch with his guitar, he stretched out his leg, rubbing my calf with his foot as he played scales.

"Listen to this," I said. I began to read aloud from the book. "'I have not purloined the cakes of the gods. I have not stolen the offerings of the spirits. I have not obstructed water when it should run. I have not extinguished a flame when it ought to burn. I have not repulsed the god in his manifestations. I am pure. I am pure. I am—'"

The scales stopped. "What is that?" John asked.

"It's from the Egyptian Book of the Dead," I replied. "It's called the Negative Confession. It's the converse of the Catholic confession, in a way. Instead of listing all the sins you've committed, you exonerate yourself. You say what you avoided."

John nodded thoughtfully. "That reminds me," he said. "I need to go to confession tomorrow."

I turned back to my book. That I was confessed as a sin galled me. Though John and I had stuck to his injunction and had not had sex for several weeks, he had tacitly ignored my challenge to find a passage in the Bible specifically prohibiting oral sex.

I knew he told these things to the priests and it shamed me. I refused to hand him an ultimatum for the same

reason I didn't want to seduce him: it would justify everything I was sure the church would tell him, and already I was clearly at a disadvantage. Neither one of us had said a word about marriage as possible solution. We couldn't have agreed on a ceremony at this point, much less anything afterwards, and it now seemed very important to finish graduate school before any weddings. This view sounded very logical and competent, I felt. I had my thesis statement, my supporting arguments. My composition students would have been proud.

And I just couldn't believe he wouldn't change his mind. It wasn't possible to me that after two years of deepening enjoyment of each other, this would be what felled us. It was strange and frustrating, this new relationship, but that didn't mean everything I loved in him had dropped away. At times, I believed it was as simple as that.

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After about three weeks of going to church and re-reading the Bible, John had begun to make increasingly frequent mention of what God wanted from us, and how we could go about achieving it, as though God had forwarded a memo. This soon led to him sleeping at his own house several times a week. It was on such a night that I had drinks with some coworkers, and, after two glasses of wine and an hour of watching the department lovebirds rub each other's necks, found myself driving, amorous and petulant, to John's.

Here's what I was thinking as I pulled in his driveway: How can he resist me? It might be difficult, but not enough.

It was later than I realized, and though I'd begun to feel a little pathetic I let myself in his front door. His living room was dark, and I felt my way through, trying to avoid knocking anything over.

In his bedroom it was quiet except for the faint sound of his breathing. I paused next to his bed, gathering courage and finding it ridiculous that I had to steel myself to touch someone I'd had sex with countless times, and then I sat carefully down at the edge of the mattress. He turned from his side onto his back.

He wasn't quite alert. I reached out as slowly as I could and touched him. I ran my fingertip along his cheekbones, over the curve of his eyebrows, along his earlobe and down the side of his neck. I had almost forgotten his smoothness, and the faint scent of his skin that I had known for years.

He had opened his eyes and was looking at me, but I suddenly found it hard to meet his gaze. Peripherally I saw him begin to smile, but he stopped as his eyes adjusted and he saw my expression. I could see in his face what I must look like, eyebrows drawn together sadly and mouth on the verge of trembling. That predatory, alcoholic confidence had flown from me.

John breathed a long, shallow breath, and I touched his collarbone and his breastbone, the smooth skin just below his ribs. Then I cupped my hands around his hips, pressing my thumbs against the crest of his hipbones. He took my hands in his and pulled them up over his body, drawing me to him until I was stretched out on top of him. He ran one hand along my spine, his fingers inscribing circles at the small of my back. I closed my eyes and waited. I felt his breath tear, and he reached up to hold my head as gently and firmly as a child's as he pressed his face into my neck, and whispered, "I'm sorry. I am."

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On Easter Sunday he went to the sunrise service. I couldn't get back to sleep after he left, and lay there thinking about Ash Wednesday. He had come over for dinner, his forehead still thumbed with a cross of ashes, which I had reached up to wipe away. I didn't know what day it was, and I didn't even realize what was on his forehead until he recoiled, actually threw his hand up to ward me off. I assumed he'd been looking under the hood of his car.

He returned from the Easter service at eight o'clock, looking purposeful. He sat down on my couch, pulling me down next to him. My face went hot. I felt a ridiculous need to take off my glasses, but I left them on and I waited for him to say what, it seemed to me, he'd been working toward since all this began.

Instead, he said, "There's a retreat coming up this month and I thought you might like to go." He fiddled with the edge of the couch cushion. "You've been reading so much about other religions, I thought you might like to learn more about this one too. About mine."

A retreat. I had visions of baptisms in a cold spring river, the smiting of brows.

"Don't you have to be Catholic?" I asked. "Would I have to lie?"

He grinned. "Yeah, I have to go underground to get you a forged St. Thomas Aquinas membership card for when they pat you down at the gate. No, it's for anyone who's interested." He stopped smiling and looked at his feet, which were tapping nervously. "So, are you?"

I was about to say something flippant about sleeping in tents, about the people I imagined being there: ruddy middle-aged men, self-satisfied and fat; young people with drab hair and faces scrubbed shiny and disingenuous as babies. He had composed his face to be calm and remote, but his eyes were bright with hope. I said yes.

"Great!" he said, and a silence fell.

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That night, we climbed into bed, John wearing the bottom half of a new pair of blue pajamas. After too many nights of pausing naked beside the bed as he put on the pants, I now wore the top. He murmured something about getting up early for work, gave me a husbandly kiss, and turned away on his side, drawing my arm around his waist. I pressed my mouth to the soft skin between his shoulder blades, on the down at the nape of his neck that grew out within a week after each haircut. I fit my knees into his and burrowed close, for he hadn't denied me this yet.

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The next Sunday, a week before the retreat, I got up before John did. I dressed in khakis and a crisp white shirt, deciding a scarf would be too obvious. Then I sat at the table, waiting. At nine o'clock he emerged from my room, dressed and whistling, and kissed

me good morning. He refused an orange or coffee, and then he left for Mass.

He had never asked me to go with him. Although I had imagined a vexing series of attempts to bring me into the fold, his invitation to the retreat was one of the only overtures he made. I was aware that this was my own fault.

I hadn't got over the oddity of hearing him say the kind of things that used to make us roll our eyes. I used to think myself the more open-minded one, because I had taken the position that God might exist even if churches seemed misguided. John had never been able to see or inhabit a middle ground between committed Catholicism and total atheism. I might disregard Church teachings with a swiftness that startled him, but I also could be moved to tears by what struck me as evidence of God: the invention of music; the gray sea with its caps of froth; pregnancy.

I poured a cup of coffee and sliced some bread for toast. As I ate, I pictured him pulling into the church parking lot and greeting other people as they got out of their cars. They all must assume he is just a nice single man, I thought, looking for a good Catholic girl. They probably greeted him every Sunday with pictures of eligible Anne Marie and sweet little Karen, passing photos to him across pews, in the path of the collection plate.

There seemed to be a great deal of evidence I had simply overlooked: he once checked the "Christian" box on a survey, and kept automatically observing Lenten fasting every spring while I ordered chicken and lamb on Fridays. And then one day he told me he'd gone back.

If I had learned anything since then it was that it was impossible to debate satisfactorily with a believer. He acknowledged all my points, all the inconsistencies I could tick off on my fingers. And though I had gotten him to admit that "God works in mysterious ways" sounded like a cop-out, he maintained that it was in fact a simple statement of truth. He admitted everything I argued, but I never felt that I had won a point. He gave me everything and retreated once more into the placid, sunlit room of his faith.

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A week later we pulled into the church parking lot, stopping next to a dozen cars parked in a neat group next to a yellow school bus that would take us out to the lake. We got out of the car and I busied myself with sleeping bags and duffel bags while John went over to talk to a lanky balding man and a woman about half his size. John motioned me over to them and I left the bags sitting on top of the trunk and walked over.

The couple turned out to be the deacon and his wife. I shook hands with them. Ted, the deacon, took my hand in both of his and said, "Ahhh, Claire. Clear. Light."

He was grinning down at me. His wife, Kathy, tilted her head, the sunlight filtering through her puffy blonde hair as she said hello. I told myself it was absurd to think everyone here was sizing me up as the bad influence.

The bus ride took over an hour, mostly on country roads with signs posted to yield to deer and ducks. It reminded me of a ride to summer camp.

The deacon wandered up and down the aisles, chatting. This seemed more daring than I would have expected. I had pictured everyone sitting on the bus seats as on church pews, hands quietly folded.

The deacon stopped next to our seat and stood, swaying with the motion of the bus, his hands gripping the green vinyl upholstery.

"I'm told this is your first retreat," he said to me. He boomed this out as though speaking from a great distance, and as I looked up at him I squinted theatrically, pretending to strain in the sunlight.

"It is," I said. "I don't really know much about this sort of thing."

"Not to worry," he said heartily, shaking his head from side to side. "You don't need to be a theologian to go on a retreat. Sometimes the people who are the least schooled have the most profound experience."

I saw John bite his lip, knowing I wanted to say something about the ease of filling what was empty. I thought I'd let the deacon slide on this one. I smiled and agreed. The deacon moved on, stepping carefully and holding onto the seats as he went.

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Whatever else I might wish to protest, the lake was lovely. Spring was far enough under way that the trees were thick with leaves again, and the crab-apples that lined the road to the main lodge were in full, pale pink bloom. Everyone got out of the bus, stretching their arms over their heads and gazing around.

"That's where the kitchen and activity room are," John told me, gesturing toward the lodge. "They'll probably hold the services and witnessing there."

"What's witnessing?" I pictured, for some reason, one person standing in the center of a room, everyone pointing solemnly at him.

"It's when people stand up and relate the experience that brought them closer to God. Sometimes the others ask questions, and we discuss it for awhile, and sometimes people just talk and then sit down again."

"It's not compulsory, right? I don't have to stand up and lie, do I?"

"Of course not," he said. "I never did it myself, actually. I never wanted to."

The deacon's wife came up behind us and tapped my shoulder.

"Come on with me," she said. "I'll show you where the tents are."

We spent the next hour stretching tents over wooden skeletons and spreading the sleeping bags out inside them. My sleeping bag was between Kathy and a woman named Audrey, who seemed to be close to my age.

"Do you come to a lot of these?" I asked her.

Audrey seemed delighted to be asked. She nodded vigorously. "Oh yes," she said. "Doug and I go on retreats whenever we can. They're so renewing. I come away from every weekend feeling wonderful. Don't you always?"

I shook my head. "I've never been on a retreat," I said.

She looked appalled. I was about to defend myself, though for what I wasn't

sure. I would have liked to say, I've never purloined the cakes of the gods. I've never stolen the offerings of the spirits.

Audrey recovered herself and patted my hand. "You will find this very enlightening," she said soothingly. "It's so nice to have you here."

I found the sheer joy with which these people welcomed me a bit suspicious. I thought of it as an earnest, childish Christian gratitude for new friends and converts.

Audrey offered to help me fluff my sleeping bag.

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Dinner was baked fish and canned vegetables.

"I don't think this is representative of the bounty of God," I whispered to John. He laughed and handed me a miniature plastic tub of margarine for my roll, which sat forlornly, spongy and falsely yellow with turmeric, on a paper napkin next to my plate.

"It feels like elementary school," I went on, enjoying his laughter. And it did. The hall was filled with big felt murals in primary colors and simple shapes.

John had been very affectionate all afternoon, hugging me to his side, lacing his fingers through my hair. Now he squeezed my hand under the table.

After dinner everyone gathered in the other section of the lodge, where a fire had been built and chairs set out in a circle. We seated ourselves and the deacon stood in the center of the circle, reading a verse from the Gospel. I looked around surreptitiously at the others, who were nodding slightly, their chins tilted up toward him.

The sermon was about suffering.

"Don't try to fight it," the deacon was saying. "Submerge yourself in it and let God bear it with you. Instead of worrying about whose fault it is, accept it. Because, believe me," he said, nodding briskly at the listeners, "there's a reason. Offer that pain up to God and he will bear it with you. Love your pain as the brush that washes you clean."

I sneaked a sideways look at John. He was staring at his hands. I waited for him to give me an ironic glance. He didn't look at me.

The deacon had been walking about as he spoke and now he stopped.

"It is the vehicle that carries you closer to God," he said.

He raised his open hand to the ceiling. I pictured him holding pain, a neat little package, in the palm of his hand, pushing it up to the sky.

The deacon tucked the ribbon into the Bible and closed it. "Now, some of you have probably been part of the process of witnessing before," he said. "It's open to anyone who would like to share with the group the experiences that have drawn them closer to faith. There aren't any rules for who can speak, or how, just that you want to. Who would like to begin?"

A man in a plaid shirt darted his hand up and then back down. "I think I'll kick things off," he said. He gave a little laugh.

He stood up in front of his chair and began to talk.

"Like a lot of people nowadays," he began, "I didn't really have a great childhood. My parents had a bad marriage, and they both drank too much. And they could be ... violent. When I was a kid I couldn't wait to be big enough to fight back. I didn't want to get away from them so much as I wanted to get back at them. I hated them," he said.

He took off his glasses and polished them on his sleeve.

"I went to church because a friend's parents offered to take me one Sunday. I had never even been to Mass." He gave another little laugh, as if to say, Imagine that.

"And I listened to the sermon—I don't even remember what it was about—and I remember feeling so calm all of a sudden, like my parents were far away and I was safe. And I stopped thinking in terms of hating them and getting back at them, and I thought instead how sad they were, how miserable. And I realized they should be pitied, not scorned.

"Which doesn't mean all my problems at home stopped. But I started thinking I could get out from under it, and that I had help."

He stopped, and stood quietly for so long that we finally realized he had finished. He sat down, and the people on either side patted his shoulders.

"I think that's important," Kathy ventured. "That he didn't expect his suffering to stop all of a sudden, and his parents to reform overnight. He had to accept it."

The others nodded and murmured. There was little discussion, and the next person, the woman named Audrey whose sleeping bag was next to mine, stood up to speak.

Unlike the man in the plaid shirt, Audrey seemed utterly at ease with this forum. She gestured to underscore her points, and when tears came to her eyes and her voice quivered, she dabbed at her cheeks with a tissue drawn from her back pocket. I watched the performance so intently that I hardly heard the substance of it, which was a litany of defeats great and small before meeting Doug and converting. When she reached this part of the speech, Audrey gazed up at the ceiling, a few tears gleaming on her cheeks, and shook her head as if she could hardly believe she was here, doing this. Then she gave a little shrug and sat down.

The last five or six people who witnessed fell somewhere between the shuffling feet and blotchy neck of the first man and Audrey's well-timed recitation. One or two people didn't talk about any catastrophe, just months or only moments of despair followed by sudden clarity. The others talked about rape and children struck with elusive diseases. Compared to what religion had helped them handle, my quarrels with Christianity seemed frivolous. How could I argue with the man who said it helped him get over the death of his wife and son by saying, "But it's sexist"? And why did I need to?

I couldn't tell if I was emotional from hearing these stories or because I was being won over. But my eyes welled up foolishly when I heard about church members setting up a schedule to clean the house and deliver food for a woman with cancer. They seemed like such nice people.

I was trying to picture my life within this circle, what it would be like to know I was watched from a loving distance. How different was it from the religions I'd been reading about? To hear these people, it was as elemental as water. It seemed to me that the world was filled with believers, existing in a way that was totally different from the way I lived. What a seductive thing it was, the idea of placing the worry of life in the hands of a god I could only know through my own imaginings, whom no one could ruin for me by producing tangible proof that I was wrong.

For there was no proof—I silently repeated the familiar, doubtful phrase with a sudden sense of contentment. No proof, only centuries of unanswered need for it, innumerable rituals to keep alive the years of faith in a thousand beings who had bestowed, over and over again, moons and oceans and wine, given to human beings as gifts fashioned out of pure tenderness.

The deacon said, rather pointedly, "Would anyone else like to speak?"

The room swelled with silence. Several people realized they were staring at me and shifted their gaze to the floor. A giveaway: no one had looked at the floor before, instead watching the center of the room where the deacon and the speakers stood.

It seemed to me that I should be lifted to my feet by a force I wouldn't dream of resisting. Instead I just stood up, wondering how I would say what I was thinking.

"I'm really impressed," I said. "I think I finally understand what people get from this. And I never realized what an incredible structure the church is. In a lot of ways it's like you've built a nation from the ground up."

The group looked gratified, and the deacon got a faraway look on his face. I could almost see the silent pen scratching in his head: "I remember a woman—a doubter who came to the faith at a retreat I led a few weeks ago—who saw Christians as one great spiritual nation ..."

"Especially," I continued, "when you think of what such a gigantic system is based on. I mean, it's just some conversation, some stories."

Kathy sucked in her breath and looked at John. The deacon lost his inner preacher expression and almost squelched a narrowing of his eyes. He looked at me down the long bridge of his nose, clasping the Bible to his chest.

"I'm sorry," I said hastily, suddenly anxious not to offend, aware that a few minutes ago, I would have said, Well, what else do you have? "That sounded belittling but I meant it as kind of a compliment. That's what I think is so amazing about this group of people sitting here, and the fact that there are so many other people doing the same thing in other places."

The deacon could not resist. "I think what Claire is talking about is a testament to the power—even in worldly, practical matters—of Christian faith," he intoned.

"No, any faith, actually," I corrected him. The deacon sat up very straight, and out of the corner of my eye I saw John run a hand through his hair. "People seem to need to perform their rituals, whatever the religion, right? Everyone fasts at some point, for example, because it reminds you what to be grateful for. What's the difference what holiday you do it for? Isn't it all the same process, with different details and the same thing at its center? I mean, every religion is a great act of creation."

The group was silent. I had disappointed them with this multicultural crap. Kathy and Audrey had leaned back elaborately in their metal chairs, their legs crossed too casually, arms folded.

I had no idea, suddenly, how to go on. I was having a hard time explaining why what I was saying was a vision of beauty to me, as it so clearly was not to them.

"Look, I guess what I mean to say is what a wonderful accomplishment it is to come up with everything that goes with religion, the philosophy and the art and ritual, and people have done it thousands of times with lots of religions, and in a lot of ways it makes the world better. Even if there isn't a god, religion still might lead you to take care of someone who's sick, or get together to help people who need it. I think that's plenty," I said.

I looked toward John, waiting for a pleased look to cross his face when he realized that for once I saw something great in what I'd argued against for so long. It felt momentous to me. After so many weeks of thinking every churchy activity he took part in was just stupid I was saying it was great. This was as close as I was capable to true faith, and though no one seemed as impressed by it as I was, still I waited for a murmur of approval and understanding to fill the room.

The man in the plaid shirt who had witnessed first looked perplexed, and the deacon had affected a remote Socratic posture, suggesting he would listen politely until the misguided student was done.

I gave one last half-hearted effort at convincing them. I gestured in the direction of the chapel next to the lodge, feebly, as if they had to look in order to know what was there.

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By the end of the second service it was 10 o'clock. The group straggled off toward rest rooms and tents, and John and I walked down to the lake.

"I remember this from a retreat when I was a teenager. There's a beautiful spot around here somewhere," John told me.

Everything he said was in the same neutral tone of voice. People were still nearby on the trail and clustered by the door of the lodge, watching us.

I began walking briskly, lifting my face into the chilly air. The breeze felt wonderful through my wool sweater, which had become a little damp. John reached over and lifted my hair off the back of my neck to let the wind cool me. I tipped my head back against his hand, grateful, but he let my hair drop and smoothed it against my neck.

The place we were looking for turned out to be a small clearing in the woods. We could hear the sounds of the lake and see just a bit of it shining silvery through the trees. The clearing was so tiny it was more of an accidental bare spot in the trees. I sat down on a large humped boulder at the edge of the grass.

John followed. He stood in front of me, resting his hands on my knees and leaning forward a bit, pretending to test my strength. I waited to see what he would say.

"How long have you been thinking about what you said in the lodge?" he asked.

"I don't even know," I said. "That was the first time it ever presented itself so obviously, but it seemed like something I've been formulating awhile."

"That's how it seemed to me too," he said. He stepped back and let go of my knees. "Like you'd been planning it for a while."

I stared at him. "You think I wrote a speech ahead of time?"

"I thought you came to learn or just to give it a chance," John said. "You had to have known it would hardly be welcome to imply that something that keeps these people afloat is just a neat conjuring trick."

"That's not what I said. You weren't listening."

"Yes, I was. You shouldn't think we'll all thank you for it."

"Why, because you can't quit spouting platitudes and think for yourselves?" I snapped.

John sat down next to me. He rubbed his eyes and then reached over and took my hand. He stroked the length of it, running his fingertip along the crevices between my fingers.

"It's not a good thing to point out how much human effort it takes to keep this thing alive," he said wearily. "The worst doubt in the world is that you've blinded yourself with what makes you happy, or comfortable, and it hasn't brought you any closer to God."

He pressed my hand between both of his, hard, and then he let it drop as though his strength had deserted him.

"What you said as though it were some wonderful thing—that religion is all planning out ritual and building churches like some cosmic zoning meeting—it's the worst fear any of us have. It's not like good works are a consolation prize in case we were wrong about the rest," he said. "If I let myself think that way I might as well just give it up."

•

The next morning I woke before the sun was quite up. Despite my sleeping bag and pillow I could feel pebbles and hard dirt, and I had slept badly.

I slipped on my shoes and climbed over the other women to the door of the tent. Audrey was sleeping on her back, her hands folded behind her head. For a moment I thought she was awake, smugly observing me.

Outside it was damp and cold, for the tents were close to the shore of the lake. I began to walk along the path, thinking vaguely of going up to the lodge for warmth and possibly coffee, but then instead I went to the clearing John had shown me the night before. I wasn't surprised to find him already there; he was an early riser and I had been able to tell the night before that he was anxious to come back by himself.

I had never seen him pray before, not even saying grace. He made me want to pray from seeing him; the tense bow of his shoulders had visibly relaxed, and I thought that if he had been facing me I could have watched the lines on his face disappear.

It occurred to me that he was actually speaking with God right then, and the thought of being in such a presence sent a docile hush right through me. I knew that John, or any believer, would tell me it was all a matter of surrender. I saw the wisdom in that, so clearly I almost knew what it felt like to give up and give in, the sudden sense of repose and warmth, of being borne by a force that would lift me like a swell of water. And I came so close to it again that I was almost angry when I felt that comforting reassertion of my disbelief, the part of me that could never quite disregard gods and goddesses of whom I'd read, who seemed as likely to me as any Bible deity.

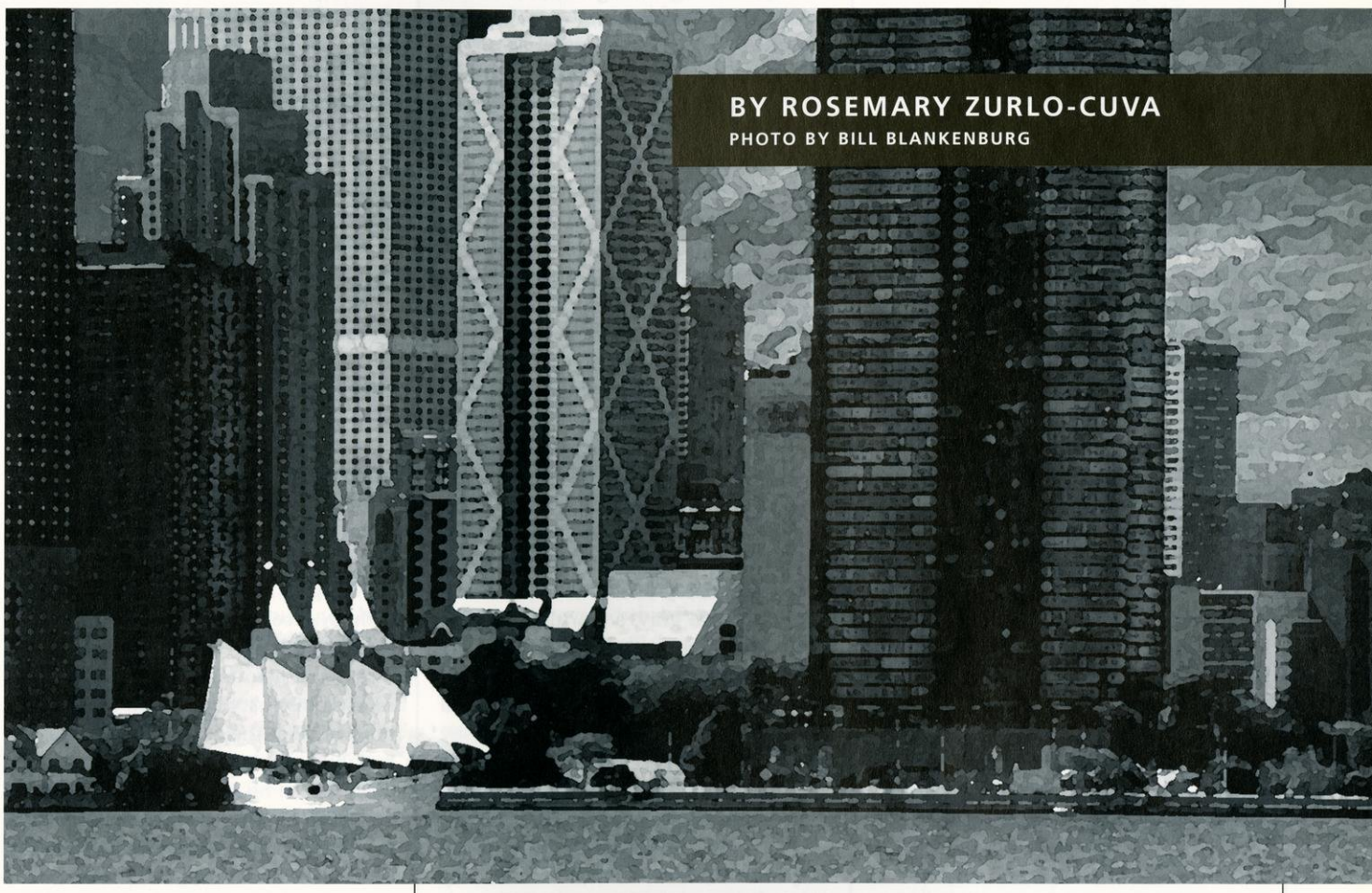
John was facing the water and the icy wind coming off the lake, wearing only a sweat suit and socks. I considered going up to him and offering my jacket, but I knew it was a foolish impulse. He might turn to me and smile, after a moment, and in that second I would watch him smooth over his disappointment at being drawn away again.

He shook his hair out of his eyes, a gesture I could recognize even from behind. I remembered again that negative confession, the exonerating recitation of avoided sins, and pictured the reaction if I had explained it the night before at the witnessing. They would have said that a speech like that would never purge a person of guilt the same way simply admitting one's actual sins would. I thought of the deacon holding up pain, so neatly contained, toward the ceiling, and wondered whether John was thinking of it too. As I watched the fabric of his sweatshirt mold against his body when the wind cut through his clothes, I understood that his faith had something in it for bearing the inevitable.

I started back up the path. I could bear the rest of the weekend, until the bus would pick us up and deposit us back in town, where I'd gather up his books and clothing and the gifts I had once offered him, all of his possessions that populated my apartment, before giving them to him again. I'd leave him to this. The thought of it filled me with a clear sharp pain that shot through me like light bursts through a prism, and, suspended in the center of it, I thought, I am pure. I am pure.

Michelle Wildgen graduated from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her work has appeared in ***Rosebud, The Madison Review****, and other publications. She is currently working toward her M.F.A. in fiction at Sarah Lawrence College.*

The Neighbor's Wife



BY ROSEMARY ZURLO-CUVA
PHOTO BY BILL BLANKENBURG

A lethargy came over him somewhere near O'Hare, where the traffic begins to congeal on the Kennedy. Paula was driving. She was telling him about Camille, Claude Monet's first wife who was also his model. The way Paula told it, the Monets were living in such an extreme of poverty that Camille became ill during her second pregnancy and never regained her health after the child's birth. Her death some months later was a blow for Monet, a terrible loss. Still, he never considered doing anything but painting; he lived off people, railing against them at times for not being more generous in their support—it would be years yet before his work was widely recognized. Richard wasn't sure whether it was the story itself or the warm weight of sunlight through the windshield that made him want to close his eyes.

"DON'T GO TO SLEEP on me now," Paula said. "I'm going to need you when we get into downtown traffic."

"It's simple," Richard told her. "Stay on 90-94. You'll get off on Jackson."

They'd hatched the Chicago excursion some evenings ago over coffee and ice cream on Steve and Paula's back porch. Sunlight streaked tawny and slantwise over the yard, while the sweet scent of freshly mown lawns filled the air. Richard noticed a softening at his edges, a loosening of his normal strictures. It was time, he'd thought, to take a few risks.

"I'll get four tickets," Steve had proposed. "Why don't you bring a date?"

Richard looked now at Paula gripping the steering wheel too tightly, and thought it might help to get her talking again.

"So, was there a moral to the story?" he asked.

"The story?"

"Camille. Monet. I assume you had a point. I mean, aside from the fact we're going to the exhibit."

Richard didn't know what he expected to hear. Probably something about the price an artist pays for his gift, or the triumph of Art over the vicissitudes of life, or even, simply, that she found the story affecting.

"I don't know," Paula said. "I guess it reminds me how utterly selfish artists can be. Poor Camille. I wonder, would she have lived if Claude had earned a few francs some other way?"

"You surprise me." She was, after all, an artist herself, a painter and printmaker whose own work was beginning to get some small recognition. "I'd expect you to be a defender of the artist's life. More of a romantic anyway."

"Men are the romantics in this world," she said with bewildering astringency. "Not artists and certainly not women."

He decided to let that one pass and dug into his pocket for change for the next toll. They slowed and Paula cranked down the window on her aging Volvo, letting in the combined odors of diesel exhaust, damp hay, and sun-heated pavement. Richard took advantage of her concentration to watch her, as he often did when he thought he wouldn't get caught. Not a beautiful woman, Paula, but fresh somehow, and bracing as a dip in cool water. Clear skin, and hair a color like clover honey, both brown and amber at once. She did not look her age, which was, he happened to know, thirty-eight, making her three years his junior. Her movements—opening a hand for the money, tossing change into the toll basket, rolling the window back up—were sure and nimble.

As they pulled away from the tollbooth, Paula's cheeks seemed more flushed than a little warm air might account for. He thought of asking her what was up, but that seemed beyond the boundaries of their solely neighborly relations. With her husband he'd grown reasonably comfortable; they borrowed each other's tools, went to basketball games at the university together. Paula remained a bit of a mystery; his most persistent impressions derived from those pleasant and unexpected moments when he would glance out a window to catch the solid muscularity of her form bent to work in her garden.

Traffic slowed to a crawl as they began to pass from the suburbs into the city. Now the scenery turned to dirty brown and industrial gray, a world of endless concrete, where garish billboards—the Blackhawks, Nike, Miller Beer—provided the color. In the year since Richard had moved from Chicago, he could not say he'd missed it one second.

"What is it, Richard? What's wrong?" Paula's voice broke through his reverie.

"Nothing," he said. "A little tired, maybe." He tried to smile; it was actually painful, so he gave up.

"I wondered what it would be like for you coming back."

"You did?" He was dismayed and oddly warmed to have been the object of her thoughts.

"Well, of course," she said as if he'd been stupid to ask.

"I'm all right," he told her. "Really, I'm fine. Look." He pointed to a sign up ahead. "Your exit is coming up in two miles. On the right."

•

They had time before their afternoon admittance to the exhibit, so they walked to an Italian place Richard knew to eat lunch at a sidewalk table. It was one of those clear hot July days when lake and sky are the same deep sapphire blue, and Michigan Avenue positively dazzles from the effect of sunlight glancing off pale stone and white marble. Richard had forgotten the relentless energy of downtown traffic. Car horns honked, tires squealed around corners, the El rumbled and clacked in the distance.

"Was your old firm somewhere around here?" Paula asked. She wore a flower-print sundress that made her look the way women do in such things, uncovered and sexy, as if they want to be touched.

"A few blocks away," he said. "On LaSalle."

"Do you want to stop in while we're here?"

Richard laughed briefly and caught Paula's questioning look. "Maybe if I'd called ahead," he said as if the suggestion had been worth considering. He was not up to the task of explaining the infuriating mix of sympathy and condescension he'd received on departing from the lucrative partnership at Pierce Rothstein to a small firm in a much smaller city. Mainly they seemed to think he'd lost his edge when his wife died. And he would not argue, that was one way to look at it.

Though a bit subdued, Paula still ate with an excellent appetite. And he quite forgot to be depressed himself, watching her reach a round golden arm to dip morsels of crusty bread into a small dish of olive oil at the center of their table. A healthy girl, his father would have said. Steve's wife, he reminded himself. Steve, no taller than Richard, but broader in every dimension, had put a large, benevolent arm around each of them that morning, insisting they go on without him, some crisis at work.

"What?" Paula looked up without warning from her chickpeas and roasted red peppers. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"It's just I think you're usually more chatty."

"I may be talkative, Richard, but I am never chatty."

"Of course not," he agreed, unsure if he was supposed to laugh.

Richard looked out at the sidewalk. Men and women, nondescript in their business suits, their careful hair and inward expressions, moved purposefully toward lunch dates and business appointments. A black man in denim overalls hawked the "homeless" newspaper on the corner, while a twentyish couple, longhaired and layered in rumpled T-shirts of varying sizes and colors,

crossed at the light. They stopped no more than eight feet from where Richard and Paula were sitting, and kissed so deeply their bodies bent in unison like plant stems curving toward the sun. Richard could feel each individual hair on his forearms.

"Wow," Paula said. "I don't think I've ever been kissed like that." She sighed, eyes still on the couple who, tangled in one another, had recommenced their way up the street. "Have you ever kissed anyone like that?"

"You mean on the street?" he asked, deliberately obtuse.

"No, I meant with such abandon."

"I don't know." He shrugged, unwilling to think about it, and poked at his mound of linguine.

"You don't know?" she persisted. "Or you don't want to talk about it?" Beneath her warmth and candor was also some urge to disturb the order of things, to push past where most people would quit. Richard enjoyed this, he was faintly surprised to discover, but that didn't mean he was going to encourage her. Sometimes people mistook his reticence for passivity.

"I don't know and I don't want to talk about it."

"Have I stumbled onto hallowed ground?" She assumed a nasty, one-sided grin. "Was your marriage one of those rare idyllic unions we all love to believe in?"

He refused to answer, and Paula's smile slowly faded until finally she blushed and looked away. "Forgive me," she said. "There was no excuse for that."

The busboy came to refill their water glasses. She got up and went inside the restaurant, and Richard watched her go, cursing himself for not walking away that morning when the plans had changed.

She returned in approximately eight minutes, two minutes under the limit he'd set to wait before getting up to go look for her. As she sat down, the arrangement of her napkin became a preoccupation, then the position of the bread basket, and then all at once she stopped fussing.

"You think we could maybe start over?"

"That depends," he replied. "How far back do we have to go?"

She had a dimple, a small indentation on only one cheek. "Just to the beginning of lunch."

"Yes," he said. "I can probably manage that."

Good intentions aside, they appeared to have run out of conversation. Neither of them felt inclined to order coffee or dessert, and there was a small struggle over the check until Richard, courteously, capitulated. All things considered, he figured he might just as well let her pay.

•

Paula warned him at the outset that the exhibit would be overwhelming. The galleries were warm from an excess of bodies, and often they had to wait for a crowd to clear before they could get a good look at a painting. As if their movements had been choreographed, they would separate as they entered each gallery, circling in opposite directions to join up again at the end. Paula showed little interest in reading about the show, so Richard took it upon himself to study the guides and explanatory notes. In this way he discovered that Paula's interpretation of poor Camille's death was, perhaps, somewhat unfair to Claude Monet. It seemed their poverty during that period was most likely the result of Monet's having stopped painting—thus losing his source of income—which may have been a consequence of Camille's illness and not its cause.

When he pointed this out to Paula, she gave him the patronizing smile of a teacher to her favorite pupil and said, "Well, that's good to know."

They were sitting on a bench in the midst of the scenes from Argenteuil. Richard liked those particular paintings so much he would have been content had the exhibit ended right there. The fleeting glimpses of Monet's life with Camille and their little son Jean—in the garden, in the orchard, at *petit déjeuner*—stirred in him a familiar and not unpleasant ache. He supposed he should attempt to take more interest in the way the paintings were made, in their light and composition, the things Paula liked to point out. But that sort of observation seemed beyond him today.

Paula stood up. "Are you ready?" It wasn't really a question; she held out her hand to pull him up off the bench. Her fingers were cool, though he could see a faint sheen of perspiration under the wispy bangs on her forehead. She must have felt his reluctance to move on, because she eyed him curiously for a few moments.

"Monet had a whole second life after Camille," she said. And drew him gently toward the threshold of the next gallery.

•

Richard could not understand all the fuss over the haystacks, which had been hung together, one after another as Monet had painted them. To Richard they seemed bizarre, if prettily colored mounds of, well, hay. Of course Paula was entranced by these paintings. She stood before them for what seemed an hour, moving in close to inspect the brush strokes, stepping back to survey them from a new vantage point. Her concentration was fierce and he hated to interrupt, until finally, enough was enough. He came up beside her and, stroking his chin, pretended to admire them too.

"Notice the preternatural glow," he said, affecting the tones of an art history professor. "Almost numinous. As if they were lit from within."

Paula turned to him, laughing. "That's very good, Richard. Did you come up with that all by yourself?"

Caught in the glow of her pleasure in his small joke he smiled back. "No," he confessed. "Overheard it."

"So I take it you're bored."

"Let's just say overwhelmed."

"All right then." She pointed toward the next gallery. "Water lilies."

•

In the gift shop they each went their own way, which was a relief. Tired and thirsty, he itched to be away from the muffled echoes and sweaty, closed-up humors of the museum. He wandered the shop in desultory fashion, and in a brief moment of sentimentality, bought a few postcards. When he looked he found Paula holding up water lily T-shirts—their colors sadly pallid after the originals—as if imagining their fit on an intended giftee.

"I'm going outside," he told her. "I'll wait for you on the steps."

Once in the blinding late afternoon sun, Richard grabbed at the breast pocket of his sports shirt, and remembered that his sunglasses were in Paula's backpack. His eyeballs ached as he

walked partway down the marble stairs before selecting a spot both visible to Paula and not too near anyone else. He could see only couples lazing that afternoon on the steps, mostly young people—students, he guessed—sharing drinks or bits of food, kissing, making conversation. A warm breeze blew over his face, pungent with lake weed and a hint of curry from some nearby restaurant. He let his mind wander home, to the tasks on his desk at the office: a contract to write, a relatively simple negotiation over product ownership, a small copyright matter. Nothing that couldn't wait. He never took any time off. One of his partners had pretended to faint when he told her he wouldn't be coming in today.

At last he spotted Paula by the print of her dress and her gait, which was quick and sturdy, with almost a lilt. Richard's taste generally ran more to the languid and willowy, so it was baffling, this fascination with thick muscular calves. Except, perhaps, that she seemed of a type emphatically unlikely to succumb to any fatal illness with a long Latin name.

"Sorry to take so long," she said, and sat next to him on the step, setting her bags down in front of her. "But I have something for you. That's partly what kept me."

She burrowed cheerily into her backpack and produced a half-liter bottle of Naya water—cold, he noted with pleasure—and a Snapple diet lemon iced tea.

"I hope that was right. The water, I mean. You don't seem like a Snapple kind of guy." She held her bottle up sideways and smacked its bottom twice before twisting the cap off.

"This is great. Thanks." He uncapped his water.

She shrugged modestly. For a few moments they drank in silence, and then Paula set her iced tea down on the step beside her. "Want to see what I got?"

Without waiting for a reply, she reached for the handled shopping bag and scooted her butt a few inches closer. Their thighs grazed and he did not pull away. Her enthusiasm was infectious, so Richard wasn't entirely faking when he oohed and ahed over the T-shirt for a neighbor, the poster for her teenaged daughter, a mug and a few other trinkets for various friends whose names she tossed off as if he already knew them. Apparently satisfied, she stuffed everything back into the bag and looked up expectantly.

"Well?" she said. "What did you get?"

"Oh. Nothing. A few postcards."

"So let's see them."

"Really, they're just postcards."

She opened her hand. "Let's see them."

To argue further invited questioning, so he gave her the crisp, brown-striped bag, and held his breath while she opened it to examine the cards: Camille, windblown, holding a parasol; Camille in pink, reading under a tree; Camille with little Jean in the garden at Argenteuil. He didn't know whether he dreaded more some casually mocking remark or a quick glance full of sympathy. Let it be a joke, he decided, and started to breathe.

She shuffled through the cards a second time, and Richard kept his eyes on the curve of her neck, fuzzed over the knobs of her cervical vertebrae with fine platinum hair. "Yes," she nodded. "These are my favorites too."

That was all. She slid the cards back into their bag and folded over the edge with fastidious care. "Thank you," she added, as if in afterthought, and shuffled away just far enough that their legs were no longer touching.

They went back to their drinks. An old couple made agonizing, slow progress down the stairs from the Art Institute, their yellowed heads tentlike, almost touching. The woman's hand dug deeply into the fabric of the man's seersucker suit coat. Richard could not tell who leant on whom for support, or whether he thought they were lovely or sad. He began to consider the problem of rush hour traffic, and thought to ask Paula if she was in a hurry to get back.

"Steve's leaving me," she announced when he turned.

"What?" Richard said, though he knew he'd heard perfectly.

"He says he's in love. There wasn't any crisis at work today. He's moving out over the weekend."

"Oh," Richard said, seeing Steve, curly-haired and obliging in the midst of an easy, open-throated laugh: Why don't you bring a date? He wondered for the second time that day just why he had come, and inspected Paula as if an answer might resolve from her being. Her posture seemed uncharacteristically slack, the drink now dangling loosely from her blunt, capable fingers, stained at the tips by paint or blue ink. His wife had taken meticulous care of her hands, glazing the nails in genteel variations on pink, a habit which now struck him as useless and hopelessly vain.

"I'm very sorry," he thought to add as the silence grew long.

"It's okay." She straightened. "It hasn't been a particularly idyllic union."

"Please," he said. "This is none of my business."

"Okay." She turned red, all the way up from the neckline of her dress. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have spoken. It was a debate whether to tell you at all. The thing is, I'm going to be needing a lawyer."

"I'm not that kind of lawyer."

"I know that," she came back, quick, like a slap. "But I thought you might know someone to recommend."

"Of course," he mumbled contritely. "I can give you some numbers when we get back."

"Thank you." This with heartbreaking formality. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to impose anything on you."

"Don't worry." He searched himself for the right thing to say, the very thing that would erase the small creases that gathered between her eyebrows. It was difficult not to reach over to smooth them away with a thumb. In the end he could only come up with another apology. "I'm sorry about Steve. I really am."

"It's okay, Richard. It's not your problem."

•

Paula chattered away through a walk in Grant Park, gulls diving around them like bright missiles against boundless blue. She chattered at Starbucks, where they killed time drinking iced coffee, and Richard watched her put away a dark chocolate brownie the size of a small brick. "You're sure you don't want some of this?" she asked every few minutes until it was gone. He'd shake his head and she'd continue with her exegesis of whatever innocuous subject he'd cooperatively set her upon. For it had come to him at the lakefront that what she wanted was to turn back the clock in the way she'd requested at lunch: Let's pretend I never said what I just said.

At first this was grating and he almost asked her to stop. And then he got curi-

ous to find out how long she could keep it up. It became an entertainment in itself to throw out new subjects just to see what she'd find to say.

"They suck you dry," she explained (on the topic of why she'd retired from organized religion). "Service committees, fund-raising committees, Sunday school committees, search committees, committees to organize committees. If you're naive enough to say 'yes' just once, you're marked, and they keep coming after you. Lanie was little and I was teaching at the time. I thought I might have to quit my job just to keep up with committee work. Finally I left. Haven't missed it, which I guess tells you something."

"You don't miss the services?" Though his own churchgoing had come to an end by the age of fifteen, Richard, like other fallen-away Catholics he knew, never quite let go of the idea that there must be some value in the ritual. "You know, spiritual communion?"

"Spiritual communion?" she scoffed. "You hardly need churches for that. You can find that in the bathroom if you go in with the right attitude."

When he laughed out loud, she scowled with suspicion.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was thinking you should write a book."

Later, his attention occupied in negotiating the old Volvo through expressway traffic that had thinned by that hour to merely congested, Richard did not at first notice the quiet. Slowing into a toll stop soon after the I-90 turnoff, it came to him that Paula had not uttered a single word since downtown. He must have gawked a bit, taking the change from her hand, because she fired him a look that managed to be at once rueful and insolent.

"Yes," she said. "The talking jag is finished. I'm thoroughly mortified and I hope you'll forget everything I've said in the last two hours. I know I already have."

"It was entertaining," he told her.

"Hmph," she said, and settled back in the seat.

Agreeably silent, they passed the scallion bulb of the Hoffman Estates water tower, the farthest suburban outpost on their route. Then toward Rockford the light began to change as the sun inched its way toward the western horizon. Great shadows appeared on the farm fields, and the clumps of green woods began to recede. It occurred to Richard that darkness did not so much fall as rise up from the earth by degrees. He remembered reading of Monet at Camille's deathbed, noting subtle gradations of color in the skin at her temples while her body grew slowly lifeless and cold. The author had wondered at Monet's detachment. Richard thought he could understand.

"Tell me something," Paula said. They were approaching the state line and Richard could already feel the flat Illinois plain giving way to the curvier terrain of Wisconsin.

Slugglishly he pulled himself from his thoughts. "What's that?"

"Why didn't you bring someone with you today?"

"Oh." It was less embarrassing than he had imagined that morning, when he expected to have to explain it to Steve. "You're touching on my social ineptitude now."

"I don't believe that. You're not the least bit socially inept."

"Thank you." He had begun to enjoy baiting her, and glanced over to see her smiling broadly at him. A good sport. Steve had probably taken advantage of that. "I just couldn't think of anyone to ask. I don't get out much."

"Really?" she asked as if she still could not quite believe him. "Because I was wondering if maybe Steve had called you to change the arrangements."

"Steve?" he said, completely bewildered.

"It's the kind of thing he would do. You know, try to make everything better by sending us off on a quasi-date. He'd tell himself he was doing you a favor, too."

"You're kidding."

"No," she said. "But I guess I've got it all wrong."

Richard could not think what to say. The sky was streaked now with colors he recognized from Paula's mini-lecture that afternoon on the Impressionist palette.

"If I embarrass myself in front of you once more," Paula said, "I may have to have you killed."

"Please," he said. "Don't think about it."

In the dusky quiet he was sure she was thinking about it. It touched him somehow, her embarrassment, her loss. It came as a hollow sensation in the pit of his stomach, and he considered the possibility that he might be hungry. From the corner of his eye he could just glimpse her silhouette, still and colorless by the fading light. Darkness lent the car an air of intimacy, quickened by the hum and hiss of the air conditioner and Paula's occasional sighs. Richard thought that if he were a different kind of man, he'd be pulling off the highway right now to kiss her. It would be clumsy and tender and inevitably brutish. They would end up in a motel room or a cornfield, and he wouldn't give a damn that he was using her or that she had her own ulterior motives.

"What would you have done?" he asked. "I mean, if I told you Steve really had called me to change the arrangements. Then what?"

"Well of course I could never see you again."

"That would be a shame."

She turned in the seat as if to study him more closely. "But I don't think you would do it. It was silly and paranoid of me to think so."

"I see," he said.

"I'll guarantee you, though, Steve thought of it."

Richard saw the rest of the evening in front of him as if he'd already lived it. The lights of the city would soon appear, and she would ask questions. Something about his work, maybe, or how he was finding it after all those years in a big city. They would say goodbye in their adjoining driveways and she would thank him for the day. He would answer with polite things and wish her the best. She would shake his hand. Or possibly, since she was that kind of person, she would hug him, swiftly pressing her body to his in a way that could be construed only as friendly. It would all happen so fast that his wits would not quite be about him, so that later, in the quiet of his house he would try to bring it all back, and find he could not recall even the weight of her in his arms.

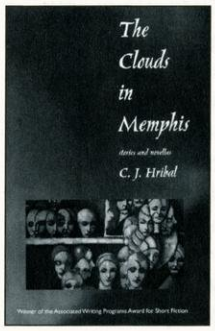
Rosemary Zurlo-Cuva is a freelance writer and teaches creative writing to middle school children in the UW–Madison Department of Education Outreach. She has twice been awarded a fiction residency at the Ragdale Foundation colony in Lake Forest, Illinois.

The Clouds in Memphis

by C. J. Hribal

University of Massachusetts Press, November 2000

REVIEW BY JEREMIAH CHAMBERLIN



Since 1990, the University of Massachusetts Press has annually published the winning manuscript of the Associated Writing Programs Award for Short Fiction. C. J. Hribal's collection of stories and novellas, *The Clouds in Memphis*, is the most recent recipient of this honor. He joins the respected ranks of such acclaimed AWP winners as A. Manette Ansay, Charles Baxter, and Jack Driscoll.

Hribal is also the author of *Matty's Heart* (1984), *American Beauty* (1987), and *The Boundaries of Twilight: Czecho-Slovak Writing from the New World* (1991). The late Raymond Carver wrote of *Matty's Heart*, "Our literature is healthier, and wiser, with the publication of this collection of short fiction."

This praise is particularly appropriate coming from Carver. In Carver's own writing, what is not said often matters most—the things his characters are unable or unwilling to articulate to one another and themselves—and such is the case with *The Clouds in Memphis*. In these stories silence is as prominent as landscape; the characters live in and around it, and are influenced by it every day of their lives. It is perhaps for this reason that the entire collection takes on a powerful atmospheric quality, like cloud cover.

In a fiction climate that is frequently dominated by stories of unfulfilled longings and petty dissatisfactions, these stories are refreshingly honest and true. While some deal with common themes—a woman withdraws into the shell of herself after her teenage son's accidental death, a young boy experiences both the camaraderie and volatility of his father's drinking, a son watches his father defeat himself at the hands of advertising and capitalism—Hribal's treatment of these themes is anything but common. Certainly these men and women sometimes do reach the bottoms of the wells of their souls and sometimes they do wonder what it might be like to live other lives, in other places, with different people. But they do not feel the need to apologize for their situations. This is how Hribal has crafted such a successful book: he has managed to steer clear of the millstones of sentimentality and self-pity that can drown a person.

"We kids—we all looked out the windows," Hribal writes at the end of one story. "Brick houses, ranches mostly, filled our view. We wondered—would life be any different for us if we lived there, or there, or there? We came to the conclusion it wouldn't."

Hribal took first prize in the *Wisconsin Academy Review* Short Story Contest. You can find his winning story and an interview with him elsewhere in this issue.

Jeremiah Chamberlin's short story, "The Month of Dying," appeared in the fall issue of the ***Wisconsin Academy Review****. His story "Stars Like Church Bells" recently took first place in the* ***Madison Magazine*** *Short Story Contest.*

Completing the Circle

by Christian Knoeller

Buttonwood Press (Champaign, Ill.), 2000

REVIEW BY ALAN JENKINS

After two readings of *Completing the Circle*, one realizes through the spare yet sturdy language that Christian Knoeller is a poet with no argument with the world. Knoeller is, quite simply, too fascinated and, yes, too enamored of its textures and movements, to have anything but praise for the beauty lying beyond the noise of contemporary life.

Completing the Circle is at once a journal of keen observation and a gallery exhibition of intimate portraits and delicate landscapes, revealing a sensibility that might truly be called "painterly." (In a sense, this view of Knoeller's work is cheating, since those of us close to the poet know of his work as a landscape painter.)

Describing a moment driving "In Amish Country," for instance, Knoeller passes an Amish farmer, who studies the stranger, yet:

he raises his right hand and
holds it aloft, motionless,
in the shadow of his black hat,
undoing my trespass
with his welcome.
Beyond him, sun glints
from hay, precious
as any metal, bearing
the memory of summer.

One senses in reading Knoeller's descriptions and reflections that William Carlos Williams would instantly recognize the poet's immersion in Williams' credo "No ideas but in things," and the good doctor's fierce dedication to locality.

When "In Crossing Desert" Knoeller says:

If you believe your eyes
This wind has always burned,

you understand in your gut this is a poet who has breathed that wind, taken it into his consciousness and turned it over many times, finally realizing:

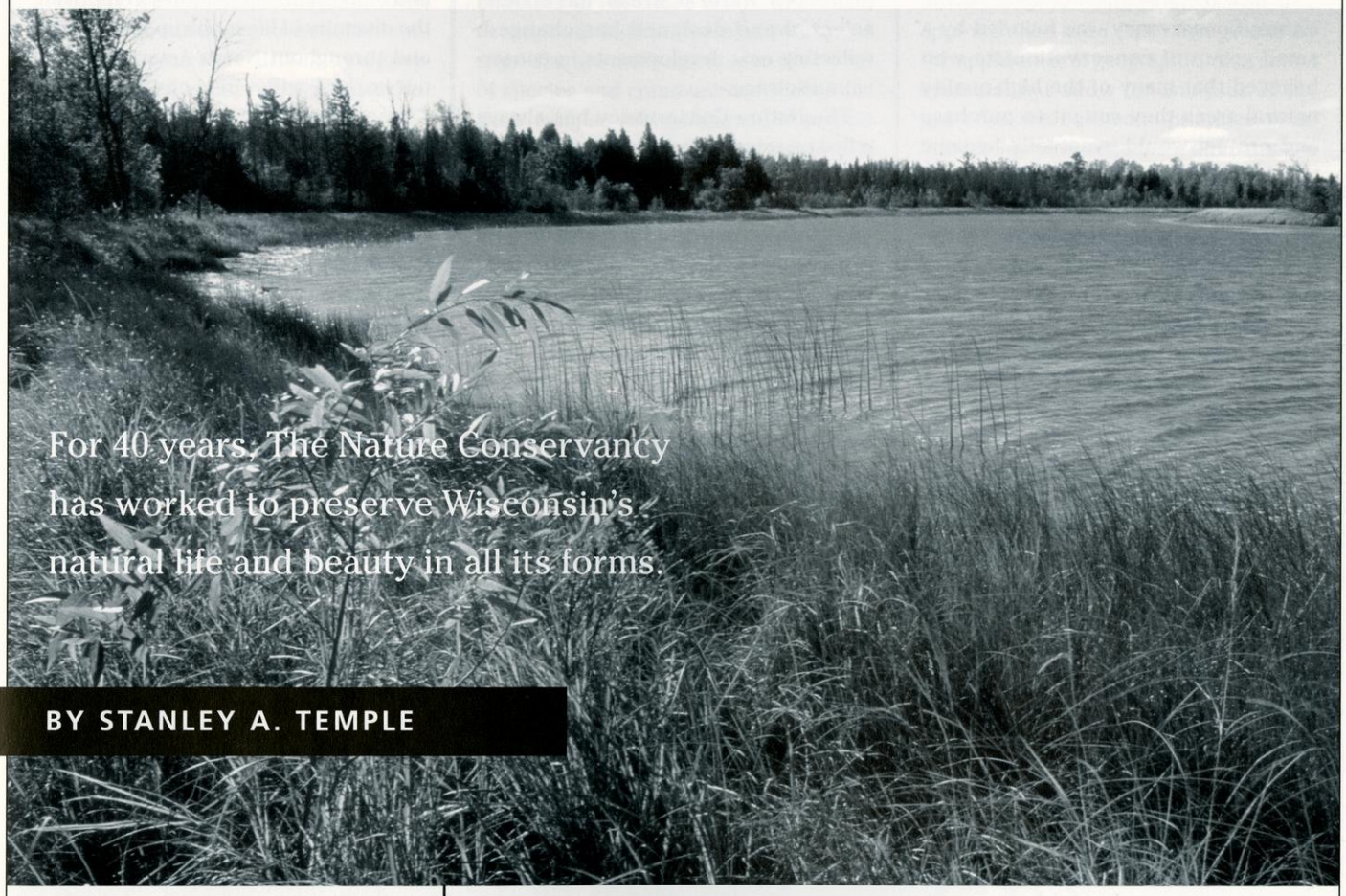
your face reflects a place,
the bright and timeless sky.

Surely this sort of visceral knowing is at one with such profound insights as offered by John Haines in observing, "Place makes people; in the end it makes everything" *(In the Dreamlight,* Copper Canyon Press, 1984).

If Haines and Knoeller are right, then there is indeed hope for a bedraggled planet, for we see in *Completing the Circle* that the beauty and subtle natural force of the world can make poetry of the kind that would be recognizable in nearly any locale where a poet might gather contemplation with what the eye beholds to turn out work of unassuming grace and strength.

Alan Jenkins' poetry and essays have appeared in the ***Wisconsin Academy Review, Petroglyph, The Wisconsin English Journal,*** *and numerous other publications. Until recently Jenkins was segment host and producer of a regional arts magazine on Wisconsin Public Radio, and he currently is a Friend of Copper Canyon Press. Jenkins and his family live in a hand-crafted log cabin in the woodlands, where they try to walk lightly upon the earth.*

Protecting Life's Diversity



For 40 years, The Nature Conservancy has worked to preserve Wisconsin's natural life and beauty in all its forms.

BY STANLEY A. TEMPLE

Globally significant: The Mink River Estuary on the Door Peninsula is one of the finest remaining examples of a freshwater estuary in the Great Lakes ecoregion. That status made it a prime choice for The Nature Conservancy's preservation efforts.

Photo by Harold E. Malde courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

Conservationists have been protecting natural areas for centuries, but it is only over the last 50 years that preservation of biological diversity has emerged as a central raison d'être for these protected places.

Earlier protected natural areas were created primarily for other reasons: to preserve scenic beauty (Wisconsin State Parks, for example, were first created in 1900); to protect natural resources (Wisconsin State Forests were created in 1907); to accommodate outdoor recreation (Wisconsin Public Hunting Areas were created in 1927); and to provide places for scientific study (Wisconsin State Scientific Areas were created in 1951).

THE EMERGENCE IN the 1970s of conservation biology, with its scientific focus on halting the rapid, global loss of biological diversity, proved to be catalytic, providing for the first time a unifying purpose for all types of protected natural areas. These places will be the cornerstones of our efforts to preserve the diversity of life on earth.

In 1960 the Wisconsin Chapter of The Nature Conservancy was founded by a small group of conservationists who believed that many of the high-quality natural areas they sought to purchase and protect would eventually become the last places where many native species and natural communities would survive in Wisconsin. (Many of these Conservancy founders were members of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, which eventually provided the group with office space.) The first place they saved through private action was Abraham's Woods in Green County, an isolated, 40-acre relict of old-growth forest, dominated by sugar maple and basswood, with a spectacular display of spring wildflowers.

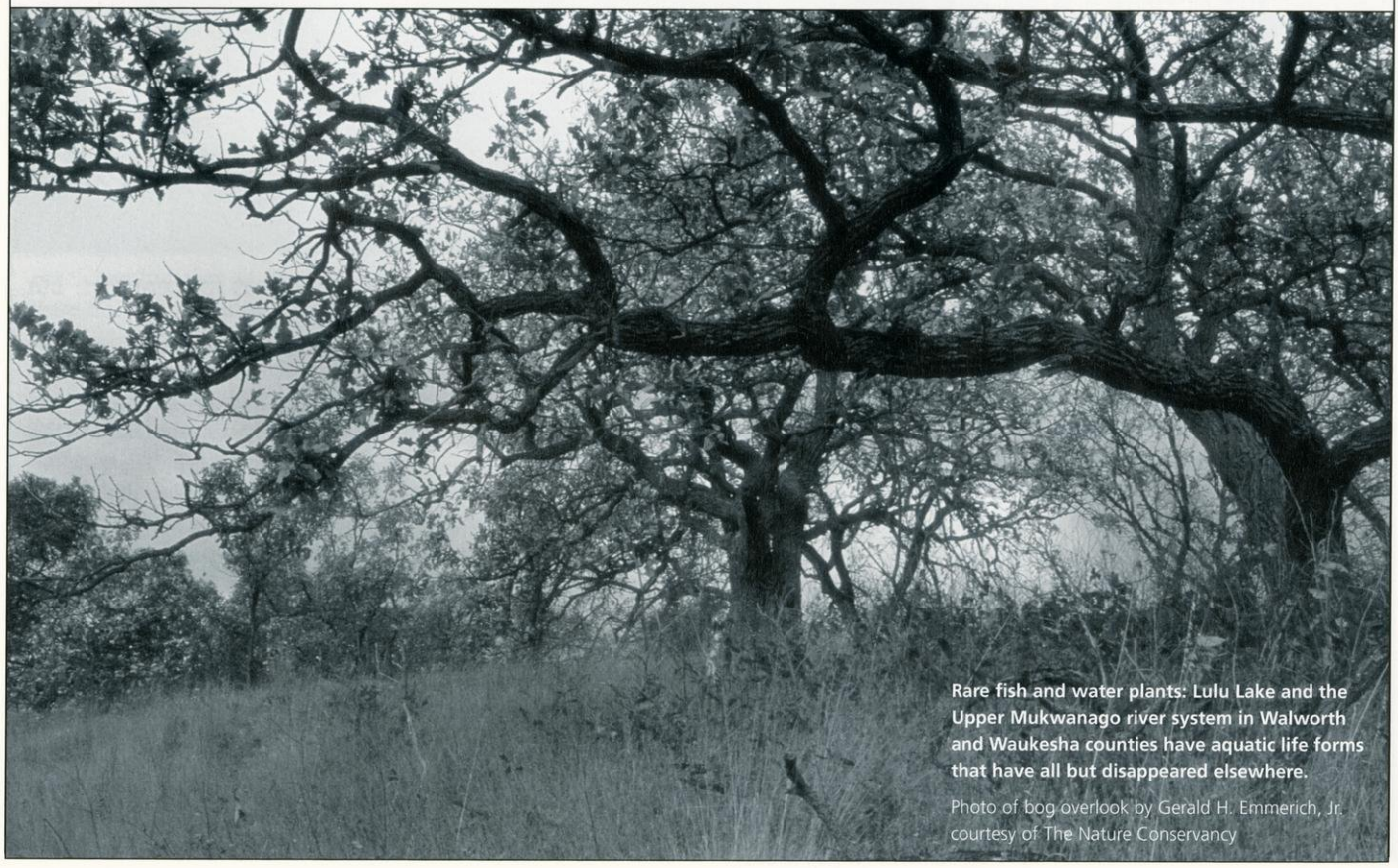
It was typical of the type of place the Conservancy protected in its early years—high-quality habitat, attractive, affordably small in size, available for purchase, and unusual—but not necessarily the type of place that strategically preserved the most threatened elements of the region's biological diversity. Since then the Conservancy has gone on to protect more than 22,000 hectares of the best remaining natural areas in the state, but the ways these protected natural areas have been selected and designed has changed, reflecting new developments in conservation science.

The Nature Conservancy has always relied on scientific advice when pursuing its mission: To preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. New approaches have helped the Conservancy make better decisions about which places it will work to save. Changes in tactics used in Wisconsin and nationwide have reflected scientific advances in conservation biology. Preserves are now being selected much more systematically. Partnerships with other institutions now allow much larger and more complex projects to be undertaken. Protected areas are now landscape scale, and are much more likely to preserve biological diversity over the long run.

Reflecting a recent reassessment of how best to succeed at its mission, the Conservancy is now taking the lead role in coordinating the assembly of networks of protected natural areas that will accommodate representative, viable examples of all the species populations and ecological communities comprising the diversity of life in the upper Midwest and throughout North America. These networks will be composed of Conservancy-owned lands as well as protected natural areas owned and managed by other conservation-minded institutions, such as local, tribal, state, and federal governments, or other private organizations.

DIVERSITY GUIDES CHOICES

If protected natural areas, such as those the Conservancy creates, are to be effective cornerstones of efforts to preserve biological diversity, two biological imperatives are clear. First, these conservation areas must include representative examples of the full range of species populations and ecological communities found naturally in a region. Second, the species populations and



Rare fish and water plants: Lulu Lake and the Upper Mukwanago river system in Walworth and Waukesha counties have aquatic life forms that have all but disappeared elsewhere.

Photo of bog overlook by Gerald H. Emmerich, Jr. courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

ecological communities represented in these areas must be viable and have the ability to persist over time.

Achieving a full representation of biological diversity within a regional network of protected natural areas requires that sites be selected carefully. But not until the 1980s was selection guided by a map of where elements of biological diversity were located. Instead, most decisions about where to establish conservation areas were driven by opportunism, expedience, political agendas, and other non-biological criteria.

The result has been a somewhat haphazard accumulation of sites that were the easiest to protect, not necessarily the sites that would make the most significant contributions to the goal of protecting the full representation of a region's biological diversity. Conservation biologists have tried to correct this widespread deficiency by providing guiding principles and enabling techniques that will make the selection process more comprehensive.

Today, decisions about which places to protect are increasingly driven by an analysis of where the elements of biological diversity (native species and natural communities) are found, their status, and the threats to them. Furthermore, selections are increasingly made within ecologically defined regions (the Conservancy calls them "ecoregions") rather than in geopolitical regions (such as states) that have no relationships with how species and communities are distributed.

Wisconsin lies within three ecoregions. For the Wisconsin chapter of the Conservancy, ecoregional planning now means that decisions about which sites to protect in Wisconsin are made in collaboration with the Conservancy's chapters in the other states that share ecoregions. This shifts attention to the sites that are most relevant to the needs of species and communities throughout their ranges. A tiny, degraded prairie remnant that seemed important from a parochial Wisconsin perspective may now pale in comparison with better, larger sites elsewhere within the "Prairie–Forest Border Ecoregion."

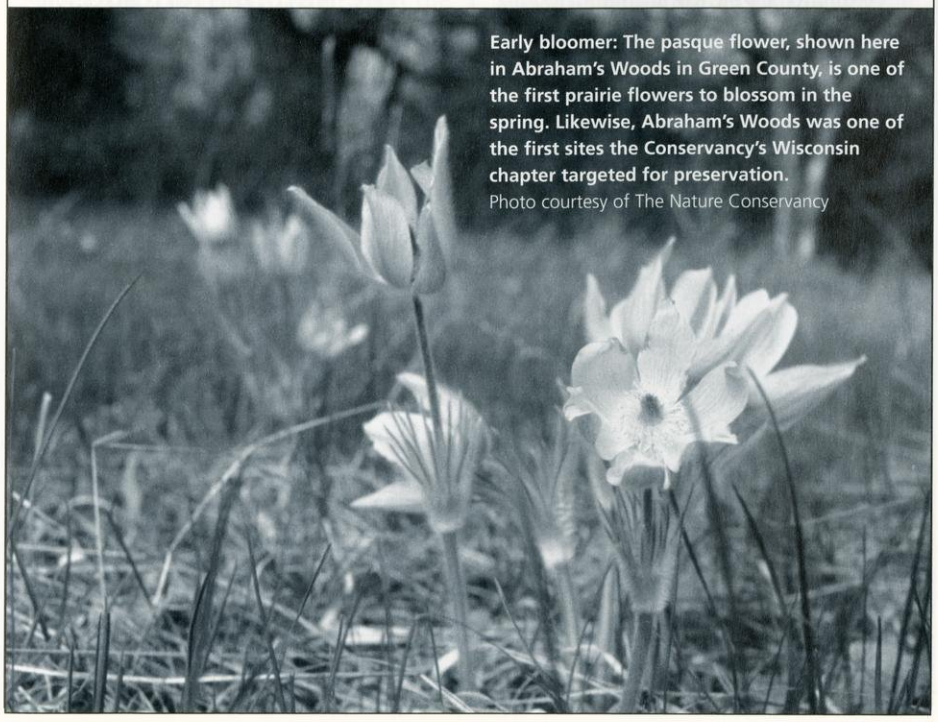
The Wisconsin chapter of the Conservancy is working in many natural areas of ecoregional and even global significance. For example, the Mink River Estuary on the Door Peninsula and the Kakagon Sloughs of Lake Superior are the finest remaining examples of freshwater estuaries in the Great Lakes Ecoregion, which encompasses the entire 250,000-square-mile watershed of the Great Lakes in the United States and Canada. The Baraboo Hills contain one of the largest patches of contiguous forest in the Prairie–Forest Border Ecoregion, an area in which fragmentation of natural habitats has been extensive. These and dozens of other ecoregionally important natural areas in Wisconsin are prime targets for protection.

One encouraging approach that has improved the selection process involves systematic prioritization of natural areas that might be considered for protection. When based on biological criteria, this approach is an important step that can direct scarce conservation resources toward the most important places. The approach has been facilitated greatly by the application of geographic information systems that allow for analyses of the traits that will be used to prioritize areas. The biological criteria most often applied are the number of species at a site, their uniqueness and rarity, as well as the naturalness and threat to the site itself. All else being equal, within an ecoregion it is better to protect the natural areas that support the greatest concentrations of biological diversity, elements of biological diversity that are found nowhere else, elements that are rare, elements that are still relatively healthy at a site, and elements that are under immediate threat.

The Nature Conservancy uses biological data from the Natural Heritage Inventory (see sidebar) to prioritize the selection process. Information on where species populations and communities are found and their rarity is used in a ranking process that identifies the best remaining examples of the rarest elements. Ideally, this ranking system directs protection efforts to the most appropriate places. For example, Lulu Lake and the associated Upper Mukwanago River system in Walworth and Waukesha counties still have healthy examples of many aquatic species and communities that have all but disappeared elsewhere in the Prairie–Forest Border Ecoregion. The site's very high ranking helped justify the Conservancy's major protection efforts there.

Although these approaches are a big improvement, they fall short of helping the Conservancy reach its central goal of full representation. They highlight priorities but do not provide a way to assess how well a system of protected natural areas will accommodate the full range of biological diversity in an ecoregion.

To address these issues, conservation planners have begun to apply thoughtful decision rules and formal optimization procedures to choose which of the many identified natural areas should be protected. The central goal is to assem-



Early bloomer: The pasque flower, shown here in Abraham's Woods in Green County, is one of the first prairie flowers to blossom in the spring. Likewise, Abraham's Woods was one of the first sites the Conservancy's Wisconsin chapter targeted for preservation.
Photo courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

ble a complementary set of protected natural areas that achieves full representation within an ecoregion, while avoiding unnecessary duplication. The Nature Conservancy calls this set of protected natural areas a "portfolio." The goal is to achieve the optimal representation of an ecoregion's biological diversity within a portfolio of protected natural areas. The Wisconsin chapter of the Conservancy is collaborating with chapters in other states as well as a host of other conservation partners to assemble these ecoregional portfolios.

Although preserve-selection strategies help conservation planners become more efficient when selecting natural areas for protection, the solutions they produce are only as reliable as the information on biological diversity used to drive the process. It is fair to say that in many cases the strategies are currently better than the knowledge of the sites that might potentially be protected in an ecoregion. Without fairly comprehensive knowledge of the distribution and status of species and communities, decisions may still be less than optimal. The collecting and processing of basic information on biological diversity is a prerequisite to an efficient selection process, but too few resources have been invested in collecting these crucial data. Wisconsin and other states that share ecoregions in the upper Midwest need to redouble systematic surveys of their biological diversity if the selection process is to achieve its ultimate goal.

BUILT TO LAST

Once selected as a potential candidate for protection, conservation areas must be designed properly to ensure persistence of the biological features that led to their selection. The design process includes such decisions as the level of protection to be afforded the site, the size, and shape of the protected area, and its proximity and connections to other natural areas. Many protected natural areas of the past have been so poorly designed that they failed to sustain the species and communities that were targeted for protection. Without clear design guidelines, much was left to chance, resulting in some protected areas that were too small, too isolated, and in other ways inadequate to accommodate the needs of inhabitants. Some of the earliest sites protected by the Conservancy suffered from these deficiencies.

To avoid such tragedies, conservation biologists have developed design principles and analytical tools that promote long-term viability. The objective is to identify the set of conditions that will allow populations or communities to persist over time. Size, shape, isolation, and connectivity are aspects of preserve design that have received much attention. Today, designs are increasingly being tailored to the specific needs of the species or communities occurring in a reserve. A variety of powerful modeling tools are now available to predict how a preserve will perform over time.

An often-used tool for reserve design is population viability analysis (PVA). These analyses allow preserve designers to predict the persistence of a single population over time, given information on the population, the preserve in which it lives, and the environment in which the preserve exists. The best models predict how uncertainties regarding the future of a population might affect its persistence under alternative preserve designs. These "stochastic" models allow conservation biologists to simulate the consequences of a biological "streak of bad luck" and design a preserve that will allow a population to persist despite setbacks that often plague small, isolated populations confined to preserves.

Typically, a PVA for a single-species population in an isolated preserve predicts the minimum size of a viable population. The modeler must define what viability means in terms of probability of persistence and time scale, but conservation planners typically set fairly high probabilities over relatively long periods—perhaps 90 percent probability of persistence over 100 years—recognizing how important long-term persistence in protected natural areas will be for many species.

Designers must then use ecological information about habitat requirements of a species to determine how large a preserve must be to accommodate a population of viable size. For example, in Wisconsin a PVA for the rare sharp-tailed grouse, commissioned by the Conservancy, revealed that a breeding population of at least 280 birds would be required to have a 95 percent probability of persistence for 50 years. At typical population densities, such a population would require about 4,000 hectares of connected pine barren habitat. None of the current conservation areas in Wisconsin's pine barrens meet this standard, and many of the smaller and more isolated populations of sharp-tailed grouse have disappeared over the last 50 years—as the PVA predicted. Enlarging some of the protected sites will be necessary to achieve long-term viability.

Because it is impractical to model the viability of every species living in a protected natural area, these single-species PVAs often focused on those populations that are of special concern (e.g., rare and endangered species) and those that might be appropriate surrogates for many other species in the community (e.g., "umbrella species"). The assumption is that if these "umbrella species" are accommodated, populations of many other, less demanding species will also be viable. Large, space-demanding organisms (for example, a specialized, top predator with a large body size) are frequently chosen because their persistence in preserves is often problematic. But other types of species are also targeted for PVAs that will be used to design a preserve. They include "keystone species" whose activities affect the welfare of many other species and

The Natural Heritage Inventory Program

The Nature Conservancy, recognizing the need for reliable information to inform its decisionmaking, has created a huge database on biological diversity called the Natural Heritage Inventory Program. In Wisconsin this program was launched in 1985 in close cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, which now houses and administers the program. The program has three main goals: to identify the state's rare or unique plants, animals, and communities; to rank them according to how severely threatened they are; and to map their geographical occurrences, quality, and viability. Information from the database helps the DNR and the Conservancy with a wide variety of decisions that might affect the future of sensitive species and communities.

have impacts on the community that are disproportionate to their abundance. The assumption is that if a design fails to accommodate a viable population of a keystone species, it may fail to meet the needs of other dependent species.

In the Baraboo Hills, the Conservancy used models of forest-interior songbird populations (such as rare warblers, thrushes and flycatchers) to inform the preserve design process. Those models highlighted the need to preserve large unbroken tracts of forest for these umbrella species and allowed the Conservancy to explore the consequences of potential land use changes in the Hills. The models predicted serious, long-term consequences for sensitive forest wildlife species if there was extensive home building in the currently forested landscape. This finding encouraged the Conservancy to work closely with local land use planners to divert home building from the most sensitive areas.

All of these models that could potentially be used to aid preserve design are driven by detailed knowledge of the biology of populations. They are only as reliable as the quality and completeness of the data available for a targeted species. Unfortunately, the most crucial data (for example, on dispersal, reproduction, and mortality) are typically lacking for the very species most often targeted. Once again, the current models are generally better than the available data, highlighting the need for more basic field work to provide a scientific foundation for the design process.

The Nature Conservancy's ecoregional approach to selecting and designing protected natural areas represents the most ambitious and scientifically based approach yet undertaken to preserve biological diversity in Wisconsin. However, the Conservancy's plans will require much assistance from other institutions. It will not be possible for the Conservancy to purchase all the natural areas slated for inclusion in a portfolio. Instead, unprecedented cooperation between all conservation institutions that believe in the Conservancy's mission will be required. The scale of the challenge must be matched by an appropriately large and well-coordinated response from conservationists.

A GRAND EXPERIMENT

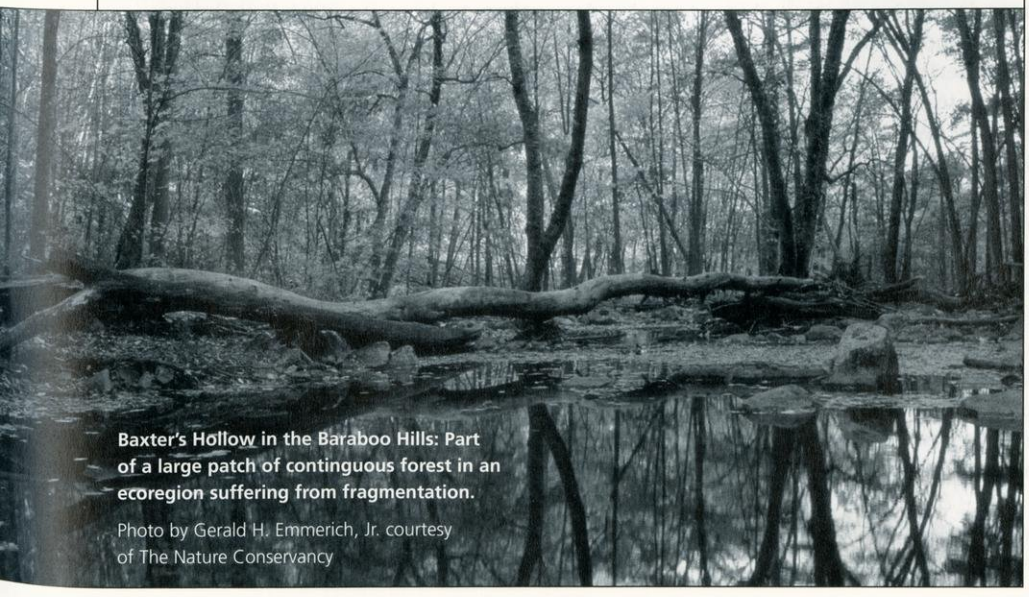
The procedures for selecting and designing protected natural areas that can be expected to preserve an ecoregion's biological diversity are well developed and getting better all the time. The development of these enhanced guidelines in times of expanding needs, diminishing options, and tightening budgets provides a strong incentive to proceed with a process that holds much promise, and the Conservancy is following the prescribed course.

On an ecoregional basis, the Conservancy's approach includes: completing an inventory of remaining natural areas that might potentially be protected; determining the distribution and status of the species and communities among those natural areas; selecting a portfolio of sites that will protect a representative example of the region's biological diversity based on decision rules and optimization procedures; and using appropriate modeling approaches to design the selected sites to insure viability of the elements of biological diversity that are present. When applied, these approaches can provide robust and efficient solutions to the problem of selecting and designing protected natural areas, and therefore help the Conservancy pursue its mission.

But these procedures are still not followed as often or as precisely as might be expected, given the existing urgency to protect biological diversity. Opportunism, expedience, and non-biological agendas still exert dominant influences on many decisions. Often the newer approaches are not implemented because the required data on targeted species and communities are not readily available. In some cases, conflicts may exist between the goals of achieving representation and viability; goals of achieving representation might, for example, favor many small reserves, whereas goals of achieving viability might favor fewer large reserves.

A grand experiment, unprecedented in the history of conservation, is under way. The protected natural areas we create now and in the near future represent test cases of a scientific approach to preserve selection and design that future generations of conservation biologists will eventually be able to assess. The test will be how well these protected natural areas actually accommodate viable examples of the full representation of an ecoregion's biological diversity.

I hope we get it right, but my greater fear is that we may fail, not because we didn't know how to select and design preserves well, but because we were unable to implement these procedures in time.

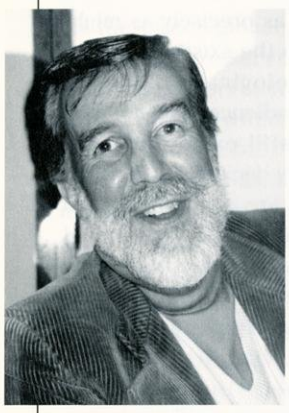


Baxter's Hollow in the Baraboo Hills: Part of a large patch of continguous forest in an ecoregion suffering from fragmentation.

Photo by Gerald H. Emmerich, Jr. courtesy of The Nature Conservancy

Stanley A. Temple is the Beers–Bascom Professor in Conservation in the Department of Wildlife Ecology at the UW–Madison. He has been Chairman of the Board of The Nature Conservancy and President of the Society for Conservation Biology. He currently chairs the Conservation Biology and Sustainable Development Program in UW–Madison's Institute for Environmental Studies.

Our Bill of Rights Forum and the Great American Immigration Experiment



The American experience with immigration has always fascinated me because it is so unique in the world. What other culture was constructed from the ground up by an intermingling of such disparate groups? It was in college that I first learned that the great American myth of "the melting pot" was too simple an explanation of what happened here; that, in fact, long before the word was conceptualized and made part of everyday conversation, what was really going on was, in fact, "multiculturalism."

And what, I wonder, is multiculturalism, anyway, other than an acknowledgment that human beings are formed from a variety of influences? Why does this buzzword engender such expressions of annoyance or boredom or dismissiveness? What is it about this concept that produces such contempt in this, our country of immigrants and descendants of immigrants, when the reality is that multiculturalism is the definitive American experience?

Why is it that the only Americans today who seem to understand the reality and value of multiculturalism are Native Americans and African Americans, the former descended from the only indigenous population of our country and the latter from the only involuntary immigrants to America? I have always thought that Hitler's scathing reference to the United States as "a nation of mongrels" was one of the best compliments that we as a society have ever received.

Wisconsin is a microcosm of the American population, distinguished (among many other things) by having the largest single Belgian-American population in the United States. (I learned that small piece of Wisconsin lore several years ago from the State Historical Society's Jack Holzhueter when we were trying to get Belgium's King Albert to pay us a visit. We do aim high.) We are a gloriously immigrant-derived state co-existing with a significant Native American and African American population. Today we are seeing people of Southeast Asian descent as well as Russian Jews and Hispanics of many origins joining our Wisconsin population mix.

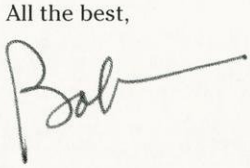
The process of immigrants joining American society has historically been, and remains, uneven, untidy, unfair, and often unjust. But the fabric of our society does eventually stretch and yield enough to become inclusive yet again. The Bill of Rights is a major part of the social glue that allows for this adaptation of different and distinct groups and individuals into American society.

As battered and tarnished as it is, I believe that the American ideal of a nation of laws that apply equally to all is a viable one, and unique in the world. Whether by design or happenstance, when our Constitution was passed in 1789, multiculturalism was already as American as apple pie. Dutch, African, German, Swedish, French, Spanish, English, Scottish, and Irish voices and traditions were already ensconced in American culture.

What was partially true in 1791 (when the Bill of Rights was formally approved as part of our Constitution but covered only a small portion of American citizens at that time) is today more fully true: the Bill of Rights is the cornerstone of our democracy because it—more than any other document—protects our individual rights as we participate in a larger society. Its role as a unifying force will only loom larger as our diverse population continues to seek its common ground.

Our democracy, built on such a variety of traditions, will remain healthy only as long as we have an engaged and informed citizenry. What could be more appropriate for the Wisconsin Academy than to host its 2001 Fall Forum on "Private Rights, Public Good: The Bill of Rights in Our Lives"? What issue could be more fundamental than the Bill of Rights? We are terribly excited about this year's Fall Forum, and I urge you to mark your calendar—the dates are October 12–13—so that you can be with us at one of the most significant public forums to take place in Wisconsin.

All the best,



Robert G. Lange
Executive Director
608/263-1692 ext. 12
rglange@facstaff.wisc.edu

Maria and Hobbes.

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